

PLUCK AND LUCK

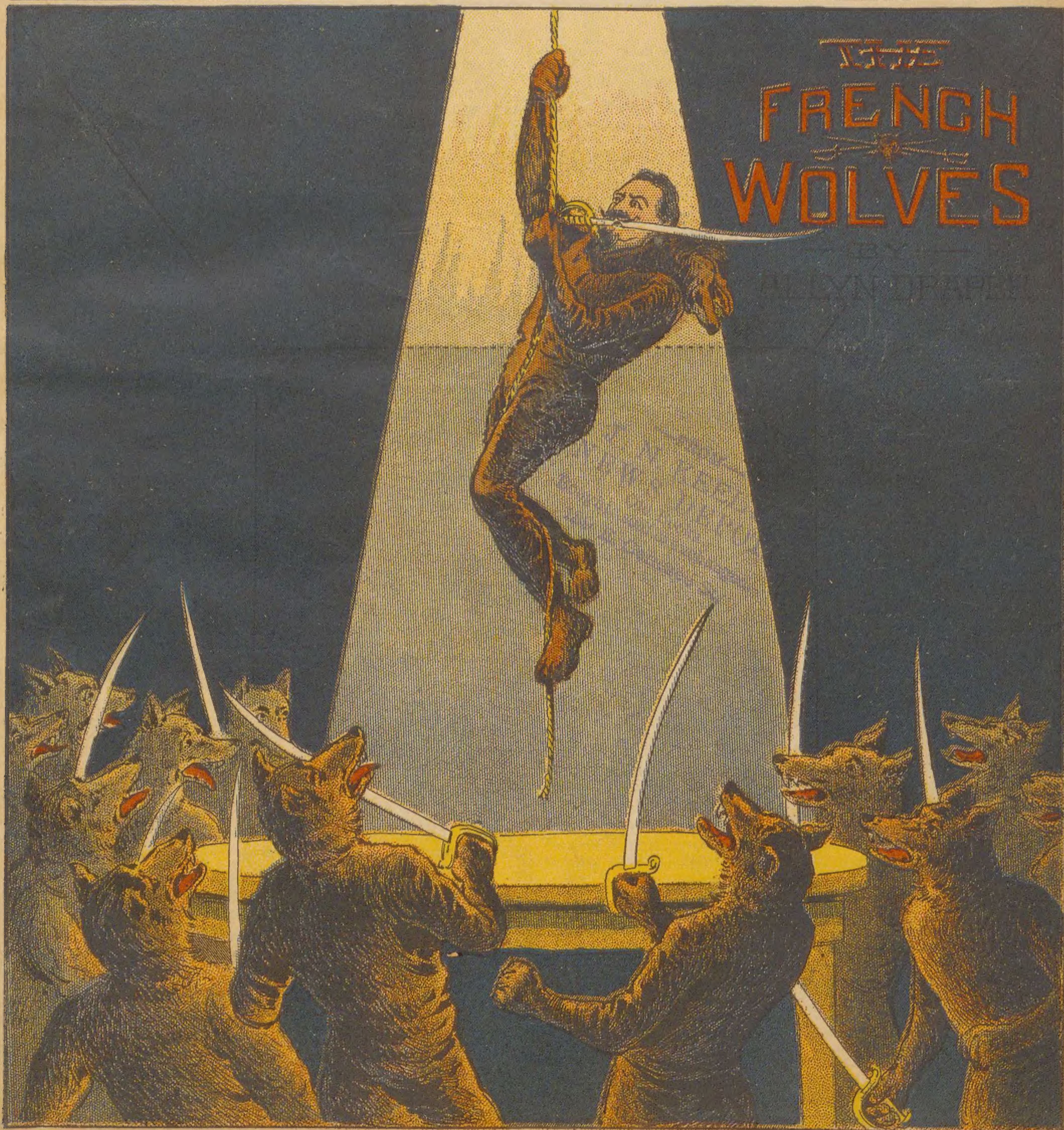
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One glance up showed Frank the rope suspended from the opening. Cutting his way through the wolves with relentless fury, the gallant fellow sprang for the rope, and up he went with lightning-like rapidity, holding the sword in his mouth.

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NEW YORK, April 4, 1900.

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The French Wolves

BY ALLYN DRAPER.

CHAPTER I.

A YOUNG HERO SETS OUT TO DESTROY THE HUMAN WOLVES.

"The Wolves were out last night, my brave captain."

These words were addressed by a young French officer to one of his comrades in arms at the time when the great Richelieu ruled the destinies of France.

It was a midwinter morning, and the two young men had met in one of the apartments of the royal palace at Versailles, near Paris.

"Who was their victim this time?" asked the young officer addressed, who was known as Captain Frank DeLacy, of the Royal Guards.

"You may not imagine?" replied Lieutenant Louis Real.

"Another rich landholder or his daughter, I presume."

"You are mistaken. It was no less a personage than the fair Marie Rochfort."

Frank DeLacy started as if he had received a blow in the face from an unseen hand, his dark eyes glittered with rage and a terrible oath came from him before he seized his companion by the arm as he demanded in frantic tones:

"Do you mean the cardinal's protegee?"

"I mean the cardinal's daughter. The fact is no secret here."

"Yes, yes; but do not whisper it aloud, my friend. Marie taken by the Wolves! Oh, this is terrible!"

"It is not so bad, after all. The cardinal will pay her ransom."

"He will not. You do not know Richelieu, or you would not say it. The dear creature will be sacrificed by the fiends."

"Captain DeLacy," said one of the court attendants, who had just approached, "Cardinal Richelieu desires an interview with you."

"I am at his service."

Two minutes after, the young officer was standing before Richelieu.

The great soldier-statesman was then past the prime of life, but he possessed all the fire and vigor of youth, while his intellect was as powerful as ever.

So thought his many foes.

"Captain DeLacy," commenced Richelieu, "I have sum-

moned you on very important business. It is not my wont to flatter, yet here I watch your career in the field as well as in court. You are brave and you are cautious. Will you undertake a desperate mission?"

"I am your humble servant."

"You have heard of this terrible band of human wolves who infest our forests?"

The young officer bowed in assent; and then his hand rested on the hilt of his sword as Richelieu proceeded:

"You know that this terrible band of thirteen have committed fearful outrages in this vicinity. They have robbed and outraged and murdered some of our best citizens. We must crush the human fiends."

"They should be crushed, my lord. They are an eternal disgrace to France."

"I feel it," continued Richelieu. "Hitherto they have baffled all my efforts at suppressing them. They have evaded our troops and agents as if they had perfect information of all our intended movements."

"That is the firm belief of many hereabouts, my lord," said the young officer, as he bent a peculiar look on Richelieu.

The keen-eyed statesman noticed the expression in the young man's eyes, and he promptly demanded:

"What do your looks and words insinuate, Captain DeLacy?"

"I never insinuate, my lord. I am a soldier, and my words and looks may be read as easily as one may perceive the flash of my sword."

"I like your candor, and I will not bear you ill-will if you speak out. What is said about this fearful band of assassins as connected with myself?"

"I am not a retailer of gossip; and while I will not mention names, I will tell you what your enemies say."

"Speak plainly, then. We cannot be overheard here."

"Are you certain of that, my lord?"

"I am assured of it. Draw near, and speak as freely as if you were in converse with your own father."

"It is said that you are in secret league with this band of murderers, and——"

"Good heaven!" exclaimed the real ruler of France, in terrible tones. "Can even my enemies believe me to be so infernally base? What object could I have to league with such

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wretches—I who may command the armies and navies of France?”

“It has been whispered,” continued the blunt young soldier, “that you even instigated this band of murderers for the purpose of ridding yourself of your enemies, or of punishing them in a secret manner.”

“This is atrocious!”

“It is pointed out that the Wolves have been carrying on their depredations ever since the snow fell, and yet not one of them has been brought to punishment. They infest the forests and highways at will, in defiance of the soldiers sent out against them.”

“I comprehend now,” said Richelieu, as a sinister smile passed over his face. “My enemies say that I have warned the Wolves of all expeditions sent out against them. They are mad, the vicious fools.”

“And that the unknown leader of the merciless band,” continued the blunt young soldier, “is high in your favor.”

“The knaves!—the traitors!” exclaimed Richelieu. “What will they say when they learn that the infernal Wolves have torn away my father’s protégée—the fair Marie Rochfort—and that they hold her for an immense ransom?”

“They will whisper that it’s but a trick of yours to baffle suspicion; that you will pay the ransom, even if it be a fortune; and that the gold will all glide back to your coffers again.”

“And that’s where the dogs will be mistaken, young man. I will not pay a single gold piece in ransom, although Marie is very dear to me. Do you believe in the base assertions against me?”

“I do not.”

“Will you undertake a secret mission for unearthing and slaying the murderous Wolves?”

“With pleasure.”

“You are aware that the mission will be a singularly hazardous one. Many brave men have already fallen in their attempts to unearth the base Wolves.”

“I am aware of it; yet will I undertake to rescue the young lady and slay the odious Wolves—on three conditions!”

“State them.”

“First: I must have full power to manage the business after my own fashion.”

“I have full confidence in you. That is fully conceded.

“Second: You must pledge me your honor that not a single soul—not even the king—must know that I am engaged in it.”

“You have your suspicions that some one in court is connected with this evil band?”

“Most assuredly. The leader of the band holds a high position here in court.”

“Whom do you suspect?”

“No one—at present. But I will unmask the captain of the Wolves, or I will forfeit my life in the attempt!”

“I understand,” said Richelieu. “I will be as silent as the grave on the subject. What is your third condition?”

“If I succeed, I claim Marie’s hand in marriage.”

“Marie’s hand in marriage!” exclaimed Richelieu, in great amazement. “That is simply preposterous. I had higher views for the fair girl. It cannot be.”

“Then I will decline the mission—much as I love her—and you will be compelled to pay the ransom or see her a corpse, nailed to the great oak, when the seven days have elapsed.”

“You love her, you say, and yet you will not make an effort in her behalf?”

“Because I would rather see her dead than forced to wed the man you design for her—the man she abhors.”

“On my honor, but you are a candid youth, indeed, and you seek a great prize.”

“The thought of Marie becoming my wife would nerve my arm and incite my brain to tremendous exertions against the

cruel Wolves. Without that promise I would be but as a common man against thirteen fiends.”

“Very clearly stated,” said Richelieu, with a pleasant smile. “I will not pay a gold piece in ransom, and Marie must not perish. I accept the third condition. Rescue her—crush this hideous conspiracy, and she will be your wife. When will you start out on your dangerous mission?”

“This very hour.”

“What assistance will you need?”

“None—at present. Send me on a mission to Spain or England, that my absence may not be noted by your enemies.”

“It will be done. Retire, and I will have the papers prepared.”

Frank DeLacy retired from the private apartment; and he had scarcely left the room when the suspicious Richelieu pressed his hand to his temples as he muttered:

“What if that young soldier, whom I have always loved, were leagued with my enemies and the vile Wolves? No—no! I am unjust. He is brave and honest, and I will trust him. If he crushes the Wolves his fortune is made.”

When Frank DeLacy reached the anteroom he encountered his friend, Louis Real, saying:

“What misfortune. Here am I sent away on a foreign mission, when—— But you know what I mean, my friend. Curse the Wolves.”

Half an hour after he had mounted his horse and was riding away in the direction of the Spanish frontier.

That afternoon Richelieu dispatched a regiment of Lancers to scour the woods in pursuit of the dreaded Wolves.

The haughty statesman gave out at the same time that he would not pay one gold piece for the ransom of Marie Rochfort.

As it was well understood that the young lady was his own beloved daughter, it was asserted that he would weaken before the seventh day.

Meanwhile the question arose in Paris and the vicinity:

“Who will be the next victim of the terrible thirteen Wolves?”

Some hinted that they would strike at the great Richelieu himself, or even at the imbecile King of France.

The terrible band traveled and worked at night, sometimes on foot and at other times mounted on fleet horses.

Each of the outlaws was enveloped in the skin of a huge wolf, that animal so common in French forests during very severe winters.

Sometimes the robbers would attack mansions and villas, and plunder and murder the inhabitants or bear some important members of the family away to demand heavy ransoms for their release.

If the ransom demanded was not placed in a certain spot before the end of the seventh day the victims would soon be found impaled on one of the great trees in the neighboring forest, and with their throats cut from ear to ear.

It was evident that the robbers were well organized; that they were accustomed to the use of arms; and that their leader was one who had often commanded in battle.

Whenever they encountered resistance they fought with desperate fury; they moved together as one man; and the captain of the Wolves was never at a loss for an expedient to bear them out of a critical situation.

And such was the band which the young soldier set out to attack.

CHAPTER II.

SEEKING THE WOLVES, AND FINDING THEM IN AN UNEXPECTED MANNER.

The police detective did not exist in the days of which we write; yet the part which our hero played in the thrilling

drama would have cast honor on the boldest and ablest of our modern Vidocqs.

After Frank DeLacy had left the palace some miles behind he turned his horse into a wood, first noting that no prowling spy of the Wolves was watching him.

Riding rapidly through the wood, he skirted Versailles and entered Paris, having so disguised himself in the meantime as to defy identification by any chance acquaintance.

He had made up his mind that it would be next to impossible to effect his purpose by any open means, and that he must assume a thorough disguise before setting out in quest of the dreaded outlaws.

Then Frank became inspired, as it were.

"The very disguise for me," he thought. "The charcoal-burners live in the woods, and—— But I will speak to the old fellow."

He did speak to the old fellow, and they soon adjourned to a humble hotel together.

It happened that they were old acquaintances.

Frank had saved the old charcoal man from a furious attack of a wild boar, while out hunting one day, and old Michael swore to be his friend forever.

When the wagon returned to the woods that night it contained two charcoal-burners, and they were both as black as negroes.

While the one was old and somewhat infirm, the other was apparently in the prime of life, rugged and strong, and as active as a fox.

After they had reached the hut in the forest, they paid a visit to the neighboring roadside inn, where Michael introduced his friend as a comrade who had served with him in the foreign wars, and who had once saved his life at the siege of Rochelle.

"My friend Peter," continued the old charcoal burner, addressing the landlord, "is fit to serve yet, for he is as strong as an ox, and able to handle his sword with any one; but they will not enlist him unless a new war breaks out, and he has to take to charcoal-burning or starve."

"And I will not starve," added Peter, with a grim smile, "if I have to take to the highway like the other two-legged Wolves."

"Speak not aloud of Wolves," remonstrated the landlord, in silent terror.

"Bah! I do not speak ill of them. I admire brave fellows who can plot and act. As Richelieu will not let us fight foreign enemies, old soldiers must find other work at home."

The coal-burner spoke in loud tones, as if courting opposition from those in the tavern.

"But an honest soldier cannot approve of such deeds," remarked old Michael. "You must be careful, or Richelieu will——"

"I don't care a snap for Richelieu. Why will he not give us soldiers work to do? He is our enemy, and I hate him."

The conversation was carried on for some time, Peter giving it to be understood that he would be only too glad to join the Wolves.

As they were returning through the forest, old Michael remarked, with a shudder:

"The Wolves are out again to-night."

"How do you know that?"

"See their marks in the snow. And there's a dead body on yonder tree. Let us hasten to the hut ere the lancers come on us."

The disguised Frank paused before the large tree on which the body was impaled; and he could perceive that it was that of a man in the full prime of life and dressed in excellent garments.

"Come on to the hut," gasped old Michael. "They are not far away."

"Who?"

"The Wolves or the soldiers. We are in danger from either."

"Did you not tell me that they did not strike at poor prey?"

"They may. Who can tell?"

And the old man forced him along through the falling snow.

Frank DeLacy would have liked to remain and investigate further, but as he had not fully confided in old Michael he did not dare to annoy him.

He was certain that his old friend would not betray him—and that was all.

He had told the old man that he would like to join the Wolves for political reasons, without telling them his real name and character.

As Frank DeLacy had risen from humble life by his bravery as a soldier, he was able to assume and play the part of a charcoal-burner in an admirable manner.

In addition to blackening his face with charcoal he had darkened his skin with dye-stuff, he had matted his hair and filled it with clay, while his whiskers and mustache were in thorough disorder.

With an old blouse, a foxskin cap and other ragged garments to suit, he was prepared to deceive the keen eye of the observant Richelieu himself.

Besides, while hunting in the woods he had picked up the slang of the charcoal-burners.

When the two men reached the hut the young man said:

"I would like to seek the Wolves, good Michael. I should have remained outside."

"The Wolves are not to be sought. They will soon learn that you are not averse to joining them. If they need a recruit they will seek you, I have heard."

"In what manner?"

"Who can tell? They may take you for a spy and kill you. They may need an active fellow like you and test you."

"Will they summon me?"

"How can I tell? Stretch on the cot and rest, as you must be weary."

Frank was weary; yet he did not sleep for more than an hour after retiring to rest.

He was thinking of his dangerous mission and of Marie.

He was not long asleep when the hut was surrounded by spectral figures arrayed in the wolfskins, four of whom entered the hut in a silent manner.

To seize and bind our sleeping hero was but the work of a few moments, and he was blindfolded at the same time.

"Speak not, or a dagger will pierce your heart," said the hoarse voice of the leader of the Wolves.

And Frank was silent.

He found himself lifted on a horse, and he was soon tied to the animal's back, after the manner of the famed Mazeppa.

Then on and on bounded the fleet horse, moving silently through the forest, while thirteen wolfish riders rode along with him.

Frank realized that he was a prisoner, and in the hands of the Wolves; yet he felt no alarm, as he was prepared to encounter the worst.

The journey was some miles in length, judging from the time occupied; yet Frank was keen enough to fancy that his captors might have been leading him in a circle, only to return to a rendezvous near the hut.

Not a word was spoken till they came to a halt, at a signal from the leader.

Then Frank was lifted from the horse and borne along by four of his captors.

After proceeding a short distance a rope was placed around his body, and he soon felt that he was being lowered into a pit or cavern, in a rough manner.

He had scarcely touched the bottom of the deep cavern when he found that he was being placed on a seat, to which his arms and legs were fastened, and he was then raised from the floor.

"Now for the trial," cried the same hoarse voice that had addressed him before.

The bandage was torn from Frank's eyes, and when he looked around he found himself in a novel position.

The chair on which he was seated was placed on a large round table, and around that table were seated the thirteen wolfish figures, each holding a naked sword in the right hand.

Four large lamps were suspended from the very high ceiling over the table, throwing sufficient light over the large cavern.

Directly over the table a long rope was suspended between the four lamps.

From the few glances that Frank was enabled to cast around before the ordeal commenced he could imagine that the cavern was fully a hundred feet in length and over fifty in breadth.

"Prisoner," commenced the leader of the band, "you expressed a desire to join the Wolves?"

Frank answered in a blunt fashion, as he shrugged his shoulders:

"What of that? Is it a crime in your eyes for me to wish to be enrolled with such gallant fellows?"

"But you wished to join us that you might betray us."

"If my hands were free and you stood before me on equal terms, brave captain, I would say you lied."

"You are a bold knave, if you are not using bravado. What is your name, and where did you serve in the army?"

"My name is Peter Dancy, and I served in Flanders and elsewhere in the Lyons White Horse Cavalry."

"What was your captain's name?"

"The last captain who commanded the company was young DeLacy, who now commands a company of the Royal Guards."

"How did you like him?"

Frank shrugged his shoulders as he replied about himself:

"He was an arrogant young upstart, but passing brave. I hear he has become a pet of the tyrant Richelieu."

"You hate Richelieu?"

"Yes, since he will no longer give employment to brave fellows like me."

"You regard yourself as a brave man?"

"As brave as any here may be."

"Are you strong and active?"

"I will pit myself against any of you."

"And use a sword with any of us?" continued the captain of the Wolves, in sarcastic tones.

"To be sure, if needs be."

"You are insolent enough at any rate. And you wish to join the Wolves?"

"That I do."

"And you will aspire to be captain soon?"

"Assuredly, if I should prove to be the best man in the band."

All the Wolves chuckled at this reply, and Frank could see fierce eyes glaring up at him from under the uncouth masks.

"We will try you, boaster," continued the captain, "and woe be to you if you fail in the ordeal! Before you can be admitted into this band you must make a vacancy."

"Pray explain," returned Frank, taking the matter as quietly as if he were surrounded by loving companions playing at a mock trial.

"We will have none but the bravest, the strongest and the most active in our band. Before you may join us you must encounter and defeat the last recruit in any trials he may select."

"If I fail to defeat the last recruit, what will be the consequence?"

"Death at his hands if you fail in defeating him at any single one of the tasks."

"And if I refuse to undergo the ordeal?"

"Your right ear and your left hand will be cut off, and you will be sent aboard again as a warning to braggarts who would join our band."

"Then I accept the ordeal, whatever the tasks may be."

The words were scarcely uttered when Frank was dragged from the table, the cords were untied and the captain of the band handed him a suit of the wolfish clothing, in one piece, saying:

"Hasten to don our honorable uniform. You must meet your adversary on equal terms."

With a shudder of disgust the young officer commenced to array himself in the wolf's skin, and he was soon arrayed from head to foot.

The forepaws of the dead animal served as mittens for the young man's hands, while the hind feet covered his own.

On glancing around through his grim disguise Frank could see that each of the Wolves was completely enveloped in his skin, and nothing of them could be seen save their glaring eyes.

Stretching his arms and walking around in a circle, Frank found that his skin did not embarrass his limbs very much.

"I am ready now," he cried.

"And so is thirteen," cried the captain, as all but one of the band seated themselves at the round table.

Frank's opponent advanced toward him without speaking a word and made a courteous bow, which our hero returned.

"Commence," cried the captain.

CHAPTER III.

THE ORDEAL OUR HERO HAD TO ENCOUNTER IN THE CAVERN.

Frank's adversary appeared to be about his own height, and his movements were easy and graceful.

After saluting our hero, he turned suddenly, sprang over the Wolf in front of him, and landed on his feet in the centre of the large round table.

Without pausing a moment he seized the loose rope suspended from the ceiling and commenced to climb it, hand over hand, with all the agility of an expert sailor.

Having reached the top, which was fully fifty feet, he lowered himself again in a very rapid manner.

Having reached the table again, he sprang out in front of Frank, made another bow, and pointed to the rope.

Frank understood the motion, and, without a moment's delay, he sprang over the Wolf's head, landed at the precise spot and seized the rope.

Up and up he went, with even more activity than his opponent.

A slight murmur of applause greeted our hero when he stood bowing before his opponent again, for he had performed the feat in far better time.

"Now for the trial of speed," said the captain, as all the Wolves rose in a body and commenced drawing the large table aside. "You will stand at yonder end of our hall and run to the other. Thirteen times will you run, back and forth. Stranger, if you touch the wall last on the final round death is your doom."

Again did the Wolf bow to Frank, and then led him to the end of the great cavern in a solemn manner.

The others ranged themselves along at the side near the lamps.

"Are you ready? Hold up your hands," cried the captain.

Both men held up their hands.

"Away with you."

The runners bounded away together at a rapid pace.

Frank's opponent was the first to reach the end of the track, and, touching the boundary, he darted back again.

"If he keeps on to the end at that pace," thought our hero, "my fate is sealed."

Bracing himself, however, the daring fellow kept on, and he soon found that his opponent did not gain much advantage.

Back and forth they went with untiring zeal, until they had but two courses to run; that is, they had to cross and recross the long cavern only.

When they started on the last course Frank was some dozen feet behind his antagonist; but he had reserved himself for the final effort.

When our young hero wheeled round for the last time the other was some ten yards in advance.

"The braggart is beaten!" cried the captain of the Wolves.

As if to give the lie to this assertion, Frank spurted out with surprising speed, passed his opponent like a flash, and touched the winning post four yards in advance.

As he turned to bow to his panting adversary, the twelve Wolves set up a shout of applause, and the captain said:

"Parbleu! he is not such a braggart as he appeared. Now for the last trial with the weapons."

The twelve Wolves pushed the large table back under the lamps and then took their seats.

Frank and his adversary stood together, near the captain, while the latter addressed them, saying:

"You are both active and fleet, and it remains to be proved whether the stranger can fight as well as he climbs and runs. Only one of you will survive the combat!"

The contestants bowed in assent.

"The stranger has still one other chance of avoiding the mortal combat," continued the captain. "Inasmuch as he has acquitted himself so well in the two trials, he may avoid the fatal struggle and retire with the loss of his right ear."

"I decline to retire thus mutilated," replied Frank.

"Listen to the terms of the combat before you decide. You are to fight on the round table before us, and swords will be the weapons."

"The weapons and the place suit me."

"Hear me out before you decide. Your opponent is an expert swordsman—one of the very best in the band. If he forces you back off the table, so that you fall off, the struggle will be over, and your death will follow on the instant."

"And if I force him off?"

"He will have the privilege of getting on again and renewing the combat. That is the one advantage we give our last recruit in the ordeal. You must slay him on the table with your sword."

"I accept the terms."

"Reflect a moment before you undertake a perilous task."

"I need no reflection. I am ready for the combat. But must I slay my adversary should I overcome him?"

"You must. This band must never consist of over thirteen members, and they must be the bravest of the brave. Have you any scruples as to shedding blood?"

"None at all; but, as a soldier, I prefer to know the man I am about to kill."

"You are confident of victory, then?"

"I have never met the man who could conquer me with the sword."

"You are still a braggart. Well, you will see the face of your adversary when he is dead—not before."

"But, perchance, he may turn out to be a brave comrade-in-arms."

"That may not be helped. Should it so happen, and he has recognized you, he will know whom he has to encounter. Prepare for the death struggle."

"I am prepared," cried Frank. "Where is my weapon?"

"Select for yourself," replied the captain, pointing to the weapons of the Wolves, which were lying before them on the table. "They are all of equal size and worth."

"Then I will select yours."

And Frank seized the captain's sword as he muttered to himself:

"I hope to plunge it into your own base heart ere long."

His opponent had already seized his sword, and he then sprang on the table.

Frank followed him on the instant.

As they raised their weapons for the encounter, the captain cried:

"Remember, stranger, if you are forced off the table death is your doom."

Frank turned to the speaker in a defiant manner as he cried:

"There's not a man in your band able to make me give way an inch, and here's my life to prove my words."

Fierce hisses greeted his defiance.

Frank knew full well that he must play the brave to the last and that a coward would have no chance in his place.

Planting his right foot in front of him and in the centre of the table, he waved his weapon as he cried:

"If my foot does not hold this place throughout the combat, then I will admit that I am a boaster, and will acknowledge defeat and crave death."

"At him, Thirteen!" cried the captain, "and give him no easy death."

The swords were joined on the instant, and Frank was nerved for the struggle.

While it may appear that he had boasted too much, it will be well to state that he was the ablest swordsman in the Guards.

Indeed, ever since he had arrived at the years of manhood he had never met his equal at fence, and he had encountered very many brilliant rivals.

Frank had some scruples about slaying an unknown foe, but he reasoned that the man before him was one of the terrible Wolves, and, besides, it was necessary to enter their ranks at all hazards.

The sword-play had scarcely commenced, however, when he felt that he had recently fenced with his unknown foe.

The man's mode of attack was familiar to him; every feint he made Frank had seen before; and each movement of the supple wrist brought harassing thoughts to Frank's disturbed mind.

"Who can it be?" thought Frank, as he parried thrust after thrust, while his right foot did not budge an inch. "Oh, Heaven, must I slay some dear friend—perchance one who is here on the same mission?"

The thought was agonizing, yet he had to fight on.

It was not the moment for indecision.

The man before him was a splendid swordsman and he was putting forth his best efforts.

In order better to keep up his character as a common soldier Frank fought in an apparently clumsy manner, while he did not allow his opponent any advantage in the attack.

The Wolves watched the struggle with intense interest, more especially when they saw that their last recruit could not gain a single point on the stranger.

It astonished them, too, a retired soldier defying a man whom they knew to be one of the very best swordsmen in all France.

Their astonishment was still greater when Frank, changing his line of action, assumed the aggressive and forced his opponent back on the table.

Back—back—back! Thirteen was forced to withdraw, until he was on the very edge of the novel dueling ground.

Another aggressive movement on Frank's part, and the man would be over on the floor.

Instead of striking out, however, our hero retreated suddenly, as he cried:

"You see I can force him over, but what is the use? You say I must slay him or be slain in turn?"

"The struggle must end in the death of one or the other," replied the captain.

"But what if I disarm him and then refuse to slay him?"

"We will slay you, as we will know that you have an object in sparing his life."

"Yet it will be murder. You can perceive that I could have slain him ere now."

"If you do not wish to proceed with the combat you may retire with the loss of your right ear. When we need a new recruit we know where to place our hands on him. You will then be enlisted without going through the ordeal, providing we become assured that you are not a spy."

"The loss of an ear! Sacre! I would slay you all ere I would suffer that. Set on again."

Frank was firmly convinced that the man before him was a friend, his dearest friend.

It was no other than Lieutenant Louis Real, who had first told him of the abduction of the young lady they both admired.

They were rivals in love, but they were sworn companions and tried friends.

Was it not probable that Louis had entered the Wolves for the purpose of destroying them?

He felt assured that Louis must have recognized him, especially when they were fencing together, as Frank had used points known to none other.

The mere fact that he had not denounced him proved that he was faithful.

And was he to slay his friend?

These thoughts flashed through Frank's mind as they renewed the combat, and he did not fight with the same vigor.

The captain of the Wolves, who had been growing very suspicious of the would-be recruit, noticed Frank's actions, and he now felt assured that he was a spy.

Springing up, sword in hand, he cried:

"Wolves, there's a treacherous spy in our midst. Seize the stranger!"

CHAPTER IV.

FRANK'S ADVENTURES IN THE CAVES OF THE WOLVES.

When Frank DeLacy was denounced as a spy by the captain of the Wolves, his first impulse was to spring from the table, sword in hand, and defy them all.

Then, on second thought, he hastily reasoned that he would not have any chance against so many strong-armed foes, and he determined to have the matter out in a more peaceful manner.

Flinging down his sword, he folded his arms on his breast and cried:

"The mischief take you, if you will have me a spy."

He was seized on the instant, and dragged from the table.

One of the first to seize him was his late opponent, who pressed his arm in a peculiar manner while dragging him from the table.

Frank's doubts were all removed.

He had one true friend at least in the Wolves' den.

And that friend was Louis Real.

"Bind the prisoner," cried the captain of the Wolves. "He is not a common man, and he must be a spy."

"If I were a spy," cried Frank, in fearless tones, "would I accept your stern conditions? Methinks you are but a poor judge of character."

"We will soon prove what you are. Who served in the regiment he speaks of?"

And the captain looked around the table, where the Wolves had again taken their seats.

The prisoner, with his arms bound behind him, was standing at the end.

Each of the Wolves had grasped his sword in a threatening

manner as if to demonstrate that they were ready for the captain's order.

"I served in that regiment," answered Frank's late opponent.

"Did you know the prisoner?"

"I did."

"What was his station?"

"He was a sergeant."

"Was he noted as a swordsman?"

"The best in the regiment."

"Was he brave in battle?"

"The bravest among the brave."

"What was his private character?"

"Not of the best, and——"

Louis Real hesitated, and looked at the prisoner and then at the captain.

"Speak on, Thirteen," said the captain, "you must speak the truth."

"I do not like to speak ill of one who has spared my life."

"Speak away," cried Frank. "I was a gambler and a rogue. I was drummed out of the regiment because I killed the rascal who said I cheated. Is not that a recommendation in your body?"

"He speaks the truth," said Louis Real; "yet no one ever accused him of cowardice. He is a fury in rage; but he was always true to his friends."

"You do me honor," cried Frank, "and I would like to be your sworn brother. Make the band fourteen, and——"

"Silence!" cried the captain, as he turned to Louis Real. "Do you guarantee that this man will be a worthy member of the Wolves?"

"With all my heart will I assert it. He will be a splendid accession."

"What say you, Wolves? Will we accept this recruit on trial?"

Each and all of the band of thirteen bowed their heads in response.

"Take a seat and unbind him," cried the captain. "We will soon put him to a severe test. Now for recreation."

Still attired in the savage disguise, Frank DeLacy took a seat at the board.

He hoped and prayed that the Wolves would fling aside their head-gear, so that he would be able to recognize some of them at least.

But he was disappointed.

Even in speaking it was plain that they assumed fictitious tones, and while drinking the wine they kept their faces covered with the wolfish disguises.

Frank took a place at the table near his late opponent.

He was hoping to be able to interchange some words with Louis, and he asked in a low voice:

"May I not know you, my brave opponent, and——"

"Silence!" cried the captain, who overheard the words. "You must know that you will never know the old members of this band, yet they all know you."

"Then how am I to learn——"

"You will learn all that is necessary in time. At present you are our humble servant. When one of the thirteen Wolves is removed by death or otherwise you will become a full member of our band. Then you will know any new recruits we accept, but you will never know the old members."

"And what am I to do until I am fully accepted?"

"You will remain here in this cave to watch and to attend our prisoners, two of whom we have now in our power. If they are not ransomed in time you will have the pleasure of killing them."

"Killing them! Why, you do not assert that I must slay in cold blood?"

"It will be your duty as the last recruit to act as our executioner, even though your dearest friend be the victim."

"How must I kill them?"

"By striking the prisoner thirteen times in the breast with a dagger. But enough of your questions. Wolves, we will proceed to important business. Was the cardinal informed of the abduction of a certain young lady?"

"He was," replied Thirteen.

"How did he receive our demand for the ransom of our fair prisoner?"

"He swears that he will not pay a single piece of gold."

"Then the girl's doom is sealed. Richelieu will keep his word."

"I have a proposition to make," said one of the Wolves.

"What is it?"

"I move that we seize the tyrant Richelieu himself and force him to give up his ill-gotten treasure."

The bold proposal was received with shouts of applause.

"On my oath but I would like to have a hand in the brave work," cried Frank.

"Silence!" cried the captain. "The daring proposal deserves attention; yet I would have you reason over it. Remember that Richelieu is always surrounded by his faithful guards and he is a brave foe."

"It will be a most hazardous undertaking I know," said the proposer of the scheme; "yet I believe that we are able to carry it out successfully. He seeks exercise at night in the garden of the palace. Could we not seize him and bear him away?"

"Death to the tyrant!" cried another.

"We will force gold out of him and then put him to death."

"Our new recruit will soon have three victims for his dagger."

Each and all of the band signified their anxiety to embark on the dangerous scheme of destroying the all-powerful prime minister of France, and their plans were soon arranged.

"To-morrow night," said the captain, "we will seize the tyrant. If he does not give us gold we will slay his daughter before his eyes and put him to the torture. We will meet at the other rendezvous. Now, let us away to our homes."

Frank was rising with the rest when the captain addressed him, saying:

"Recruit, you will remain here. You will find our prisoners in the inner apartment, and bread and wine also."

The captain sprang on the table, seized the rope suspended from the ceiling, clambered up in an active manner, and then disappeared without.

The other Wolves ascended one by one in the same manner, Thirteen being the last to leave the cave.

Frank was in hopes that he could get a few words with Louis before he left the cave, but the latter, as he sprang for the rope made a sign as if to intimate that they were watched from above.

When Louis ascended the rope was drawn up.

The lamps were still left burning over the table, and they were suspended from ropes running across the cavern.

"On my oath, but I am a prisoner," muttered our daring hero, as he stared up at the ceiling, where he could perceive a stone slab to which an iron ring was attached, "providing there is not another way out of this infernal den of thieves. Well, here goes to pay a visit to the dear Marie."

Seizing one of the lamps, he proceeded to the end of the cave, where he had noticed an iron door while engaged in the foot-race.

The iron door was bolted on the side next to Frank, and he soon withdrew the bolt.

Then he perceived a narrow passage, at the end of which was another apartment.

"Who's here?" he cried, as he flashed the lamp around the place.

"Another of these horrid creatures," cried a well-known

voice, as a beautiful girl rose from a rude couch. "Wretch, have you come to murder us?"

"'Tis Marie!" cried Frank, springing forward.

The young girl uttered a cry of terror as she found herself clasped in the Wolf's arms.

"'Tis me—'tis your Frank. Marie, I have come to save you!"

"Oh, Theresa, this is Captain DeLacy. Why did you adopt this horrid disguise?"

Another beautiful young girl now arose from the couch, whom Marie introduced to Frank as Theresa Lamar, the heiress of a wealthy Parisian banker.

Explanations were soon given by Frank as to his appearance in the cave in the wolfish disguise, and he received the warmest congratulations of the young girls.

"And can we not escape now?" inquired Marie Rochfort.

"I hope so. Come out with me to the main cave. Did you recognize any of your fiendish captors?"

"Not one of them. I was seized while asleep, a cloak was placed on my head, and I was borne here on horseback before one of these horrible creatures."

"And I have the same story to tell," said Theresa Lamar. "I have been here three nights."

Frank searched carefully for another way out of the cave, as he remarked:

"Even if the ropes were suspended from above the slab must be opened by a secret spring."

"And how could we ever climb up there?" said Marie, as she peered up at the high ceiling.

"In with you to the back apartment," said Frank in alarmed tones. "There's some one opening the slab above."

The two young girls flew into the other cave as fast as possible, and they had scarcely disappeared before a wolfish figure was seen lowering the rope.

Frank had seated himself at the table, placing his head thereon, as if asleep.

In another moment a hand was laid on his shoulder and a genial voice cried out:

"It is I, dear Frank."

"Are you alone, Louis?"

"I am alone. Have you seen the ladies?"

"I have. You entered the murderers' band in order to rescue Marie?"

"I did, Frank."

"Then we can work together. Did you have to slay your predecessor?"

"I did. His body is nailed to a tree in the wood outside."

"But the wretches know you."

"Yes, they know me. They believe that I am sincere in my hatred of Richelieu, and I was approached. They believe that my predecessor—Thirteen—was a spy, and they got rid of him by letting me slay him."

"Do you know any of the band, Louis?"

"Not I. I came to the wood outside by appointment that night at dusk. I was led here blindfolded, when I had to go through the ordeal as you did."

"And now what do you propose?"

"I am in doubt how to act. They deem me an enemy of Richelieu. Of course we must rescue the young ladies, and we must warn the cardinal; but I would also like to crush the infamous and murderous conspirators, some of whom, I am certain, hold high positions."

"Do you not risk much in returning here now, Louis? May not the others return also and slay you?"

"Yes, traitorous dogs!" cried a coarse voice from above, "you are both exposed. Death will soon be your doom!"

The rope was drawn up on the instant and the slab was closed.

It was the captain of the Wolves who had denounced them,

CHAPTER V.

STIRRING ADVENTURES IN THE CAVERN AND IN THE WOODS.

Frank's first impulse on hearing the denunciation was to spring to the side of the cave, where various kinds of arms were hanging, and there seize a sword and two pistols, as well as a carbine.

"Is there another outlet from this infernal den, Louis?" he asked.

"I cannot tell. I always entered through the hole above."

"We must fight to the death. If there's no other way in we will attack them as they come down the rope singly. We will drag away the table."

As they were drawing the table aside the two young girls appeared again.

The young men had thrown back the horrid wolves' heads, and Louis Real was recognized by each of them.

"Are we in danger?" asked Marie, who was the bravest of the two.

"In some danger," replied the brave Frank, in confident tones. "The murderous wretches have discovered who I am. Ha! there's the rope coming down. I will assail the first who appears. Ladies, retire to the other apartment."

The rope was being lowered, when a cry of terror burst from Theresa, while Marie drew back, crying:

"The wretches are in the other apartment! I will fight with you, brave men."

And the noble girl sprang to seize a sword just as ten of the Wolves rushed into the main cave.

The moment they appeared Frank pushed the two girls behind him, and he then sprang up to strike the rope holding the lamps.

The place was in darkness.

Louis Real stood beside his friend and they were both shielding the girls.

"Fire!" whispered Frank.

The guns flashed out a moment after, and then out rang a mocking laugh, while the captain's voice was heard crying:

"Idiots, you are trapped! We will slay you at our leisure. Captain DeLacy, you were recognized from the outset. Richelieu cannot save you now."

"I can save myself, dog, and I defy you to the death; yet would I treat with you for these innocent young ladies."

"We will not treat with spies!" yelled the hoarse voice from the inner cave. "The girls are doomed as well as you, if their ransoms be not soon forthcoming."

"There is another way out," whispered Frank to his friend. "What do you say if we strive to cut our way through the fiends?"

"I am with you, though I am sure they are all valiant men."

"They are cut-throats, and they cannot fight as honest men. Let us at them."

Warning the girls to remain behind them, Frank and his friend moved cautiously toward the inner cave, each holding a sword in one hand and a pistol in the other.

The Wolves were silent in the inner apartment, but the brave friends knew that they were meditating a murderous movement.

Moving in the dark with noiseless steps, the friends soon reached the iron door, which they found to be secured on the other side.

"We will lock them in," whispered Frank, as he drew the iron bolt; "and then they will have to attack us by the rope."

"The other passage leads out from the inner cave. Had we not better have a light?"

"Certainly. You have a flint and steel, and here's a lamp here. Ladies, do not despair yet. We will save you."

"We will not despair," said Marie. "Oh, mercy, they are on us!"

Louis Real had just lit the lamp, and by its light they beheld the twelve Wolves standing under the rope in the main cave, and they all held their swords ready.

"On them," cried the captain, "and disarm them on the instant!"

The young men fired their pistols on the instant, and two of the Wolves uttered cries of pain as they fell on the floor.

With angry yells and fierce threats the others closed on the young heroes.

One glance up showed Frank the rope suspended from the opening.

Cutting his way through the Wolves with relentless fury, the gallant fellow sprang for the rope, and up he went with lightning-like rapidity, holding the sword in his mouth.

Some of the Wolves drew their pistols and fired at him; but he reached the opening in safety, and the next instant he had the rope up after him, as he yelled down:

"Now, dogs, you are all prisoners. You have bolted the iron door on the inside. If you touch my friend or the young ladies I will have you burned alive. Keep brave hearts, friends, and I will rescue you."

Louis Real was overpowered before Frank reached the opening, and the young ladies were also seized by the Wolves.

"Force open that door and out after the spy!" yelled the captain.

The Wolves seized carbines and benches, and struck at the strong iron door with great force, while the leader cried:

"Blow it open with powder. We must not be caught in a trap."

When Frank reached the slab he entered a small dark passage, through which he had to move with bent head, as he muttered:

"If I can only find the dogs' horses, I will ride away for the lancers. Why did I not ask Louis as to the position of the cave?"

After pressing on for some distance, he found another dark passage leading to the left, and descending into the earth.

"This must be the path to the other entrance," he said to himself. "I will pursue it and make certain."

When he had proceeded some distance a loud explosion fell on his ears.

And then he paused to listen.

Very soon after he could hear the jingling of arms and the tramp of hurried footsteps.

"They have blown open the door," he muttered, as he turned to fly, "and they are coming this way. I must haste to find my way out."

Pushing back again with all speed, Frank pressed on in the dark, feeling his way through the low and narrow passage.

Very soon a light flashed out behind him, while the tramping and clanging of arms drew nearer and nearer.

"They are closing on me," he muttered. "Would it not be well to await them in this narrow passage and fight them singly? No—they may shoot me down, and my pistols are empty. I must live for the dear friends in peril."

"There he is—the dog of a spy!" yelled the leader of the Wolves, who was at the head of his band holding a torch in his hand. "Now he is at our mercy."

Frank pressed on with all the reckless speed he could command, and he soon encountered a pile of loose brushwood at the end of the passage.

Pushing the brushwood aside, he dashed out into a clump of young trees, and the Wolves were close behind him.

"Where can their horses be?" he muttered, as he glanced around, while he hacked at the young trees with his sword. "Ha—now I am out in the wood. I will mark my flight as I

dash along, so that I can find the infernal den if I survive the adventure."

The snow had ceased to fall when Frank reached the wood, but it was deep on the ground, and his footprints would serve as a guide to his pursuers.

He had not proceeded far before he struck on a path trampled by horses' feet, and at the same moment the neighing of a horse behind him told him that the Wolves were mounted and in full pursuit.

Still hacking the trees with his sword as he sped along, Frank sprang in from the path and forced his way through the bushes, as he muttered to himself:

"They cannot follow me on horseback here. They must come on foot."

The captain of the Wolves set up a yell of rage as he reached the spot where Frank had taken to the close brushwood.

"Dismount and pursue," he cried. "The dog of a spy must not escape us. Let Twelve remain here to hold the horses."

Frank heard the command as he pushed through the brushwood as noiselessly as possible, and an idea was suggested thereby.

When he had proceeded some distance he turned to the right, ran on for a distance of twenty yards, and then wheeled about to regain the spot where the horses were standing, as he muttered to himself:

"I will secure a horse, and then I will defy the dogs. There is but one in charge, and it will be strange if I do not make short work of him."

Like wild beasts in pursuit of their prey, the Wolves dashed on, sending forth their yells at the same time as they tracked the fugitive.

Just as Frank reached the trampled path near where the horses were standing the captain yelled forth:

"Beware, Twelve! The dog is making to take one of the horses."

Twelve saw Frank making for him, and he sprang to the encounter.

The brave young man was in the act of aiming a blow at the Wolf, when his foot slipped on the snow and he fell on his back, striking his head against a tree.

Then the Wolves pounced on him in a savage manner, sending forth their vengeful cries at the same time.

Frank struggled with all his might; but before he could regain his feet his arms were secured behind him and he was a prisoner.

As the triumphant Wolves were leading their prisoner away, a human head was raised above the bushes near by, and a voice could be heard to mutter:

"I am a dolt if that is not the voice of the brave DeLacy. On my faith, but I will track the Wolves to their den. He must not be their prey if I can aid him."

The speaker was old Michael, the charcoal-burner, who had missed his guest from the hut and sallied out in search of him.

CHAPTER VI.

THE HUMAN WOLVES ARE SURPRISED BY A NOCTURNAL VISITOR.

Frank was blindfolded again before he was borne back to the cavern, and his savage captors bestowed blows and kicks on him during the trip, accompanied by fierce threats as to his final punishment.

Fastening the rope around his waist, he was lowered into the cave, and then the bands were taken from his eyes.

Without pausing for much ceremony, the captain pointed to the other prisoners, as he cried, in his hoarse, disguised voice:

"The ladies will be spared for the ransom, providing they

take solemn oaths to wed those whom I will name. You will both die in half an hour. And may thus perish all enemies of our band."

"I will not make any promise," cried the heroic Marie. "As to wedding the one whom you may name, I prefer death to an alliance with any one connected with your infamous band. My guardian, Cardinal Richelieu, will protect me."

"Let the cardinal look to himself!" cried the captain. "Have you anything to say before you die, Captain DeLacy?"

"I am not to die at your hands, base, murderous dogs!" replied Frank.

"Who can save you? You have entered here as a spy; you have wounded four of our noble band, and you have attempted to murder another in the wood. A fearful death awaits you!"

"I defy you still. You will all suffer terrible deaths for your crimes."

"You are an idiot! Louis Real, have you aught to say before you die?"

"I have nothing to say, only that I regret the non-success of our efforts for the destruction of your band, and for the rescue of these amiable ladies. I defy you also!"

"What form of death will be administered to the base spies?" demanded the captain, as he turned to the others.

"The most horrible that can be inflicted!" said one of the wounded Wolves.

"Cut them limb from limb and send their heads to Richelieu!" cried another of the wounded.

"Torture to death!" cried another sufferer. "Roast them in burning oil!"

Frank and Louis were standing side by side with their arms bound behind their backs, and the young girls were seated near the table, which was drawn under the lamps again.

All the lamps were burning brightly and the rope was suspended from the ceiling.

The young girls were not bound, as they were not deemed dangerous.

The Wolves were seated around the table, the wounded men having bandaged their arms and heads, while they all retained their savage disguises.

"Louis Real," continued the captain, "we had hoped that you would become a worthy member of our band. As for DeLacy, we know that he is a creature of Richelieu. Prepare for death, the pair of you, and——"

At that moment a wild howl broke on the ears of all, and down on the table fell a tremendous wolf, the blood streaming from a huge gash on his head.

The startled Wolves started up in alarm on beholding the unlooked-for intruder of the real species.

The wounded wolf lay stretched on the table for some moments, as if stunned by the fall, and then it sprang up and glared around at the spectators with bloodshot and flaming eyes, while it kept up its hideous howling.

"Slay the monster," yelled the captain, as he made a thrust at the fierce monster with his sword.

The young girls sent forth cries of terror as they beheld the wolf glaring at them, and all was fearful confusion in the cave.

The wolf sprang from the table, avoiding the sword-thrusts aimed at it, and dashed at the affrighted girls, who were retreating backward in the cavern.

"Slay the animal," again cried the captain of the band.

When Frank beheld the wounded wolf springing at Marie he dashed forward and raised his foot, while he struggled to burst his bonds at the same moment, as he yelled in tones of anguish:

"Dogs—dogs of cowards—will you permit the beast to slay the lady?"

Dealing the wolf a kick, he sent him sprawling on the floor.

At the same moment, in the excitement of the effort the brave young man burst the bonds that held his arms.

Springing to the table, he seized the sword of one of the wounded, darted on the howling wolf and plunged the weapon into his breast, as he exclaimed in maddened tones:

"Now, I will sell my life dearly. Cowards, here's at you again!"

The human Wolves were startled by the sudden appearance of the enraged animal, yet they were not cowards.

Before they could fully recover from the shock, however, so prompt and terrible were the actions of our young hero, he was among them, slashing right and left, with almost resistless impetuosity.

The brave Marie, seeing the wolf slain, sprang to the table, seized a sword and cut Louis Real's bonds, as she cried:

"Succor your gallant friend. Slay the beasts in human form!"

Louis responded promptly, and dashed into the melee, shouting:

"Strike fast and true, brave DeLacy. I will back you to the death!"

The captain of the Wolves was the first of the band to regain his presence of mind.

Planting himself in front of Frank, he engaged him in fence, as he cried:

"Form and attack in order, brave Wolves. Cut down the infernal spies."

"On my oath, but I must take a hand in that play," cried a rough voice above. "I'll use my ax against the human Wolves, as I did against the animal."

And down the rope descended old Michael, the charcoal-burner, the bloody ax in his belt and the martial fire of his youth flashing from his eyes.

The old man struck the table with great force, but he did not lose his balance.

The Wolves sent forth cries of surprise, as they beheld the old fellow springing from the table, ax in hand; but the captain retained his presence of mind, as he still faced Frank, and yelled forth:

"Close up in order, Wolves, and be not dismayed. There are but three of them to face us, and we outnumber them as nearly three to one. Down with the spies! Fight for your safety and for vengeance."

"Death to the murderous Wolves!" cried Frank, as he struck at his foe. "Friends, slash and cut for life and love."

CHAPTER VII.

THE WOLVES ASSAIL THEIR FOES AND FIGHT WITH FIERCE FURY.

Frank DeLacy fought fast and furious, hoping to cut down the captain of the band at the first onset; but he soon found that he had a strong and skillful foe to contend with and one who was acting as if fighting was a pastime or a regular business.

Louis Real ranged himself beside his friend, using his sword with great force and dexterity as he kept shouting his war cry.

The old charcoal burner, flourishing the ax with intense vigor, kept three of the Wolves at bay, while he kept his eye on the gallant Frank, who had now become a hero of the first grade in Michael's estimation.

The young girls retired toward the iron door at the end of the cave, where they stood and watched the fearful and unequal struggle with absorbing interest.

It was, indeed, a doubtful struggle, on which depended the lives of five honest human beings, or the extermination of an infamous band.

The three friends had so placed themselves across the cavern that their assailants could not attack them in the rear.

Frank DeLacy was in the centre, while his two friends, giving him full room for free action, kept some five feet away on each side.

The wounded Wolves, who were comparatively helpless in the struggle, stood behind their friends urging them on with yells and cries for vengeance.

It soon became manifest that Frank's small party could not withstand the fierce Wolves, every man of whom was master of his weapon, as well as courageous, active and strong.

Man to man it would have been almost an equal fight.

Frank DeLacy had encountered many able adversaries on the battlefield and in private conflict, but he was soon compelled to admit, finally, that the captain of the band was the best swordsman he had ever met.

The man was cool in force, strong of wrist, and as active as a trained athlete.

Moreover, he displayed a certain amount of chivalrous feeling in dealing with our young hero.

When some of the other Wolves attempted to press forward and aid him in assailing Frank, he motioned them back, saying:

"Deal with the others. I am not worthy of command, if I am not able to conquer this young minion of the tyrant. I will give him his last fencing lesson."

"Would that the struggle depended on our efforts," said Frank. "Fiend that you are, I would encounter you for a kingdom or for my soul's salvation."

"I'll soon send you to perdition, young braggart. Ha—that is a new trick in fence, but it will not serve you."

"That will!" cried Frank, as he sent the Wolf's sword flying over his head.

Then our hero made a deadly thrust at the breast of the unarmed foe, when his sword met with a violent resistance, and it was shattered in the grasp of the gallant youth.

"You wear a secret armor, dog," said Frank, as he sprang to seize another sword from the side of the cave.

A mocking laugh burst from the Wolves, and the captain yelled:

"In on them, and give them no quarter. Ha, ha, ha! The young fool fancied he had me at his mercy."

With yells and jeers the Wolves closed to the encounter in fierce and deadly earnest, and it seemed as if the devoted friends were doomed to destruction.

But while the yells and mocking cries were at their height, a wilder and a fiercer howling arose above them, and it was re-echoed through the caves with startling effect, causing the combatants to pause in their unequal struggle and sending a deathly chill through the veins of the young girls.

They all held their breaths and stared up with wondering eyes.

Another fearful howl was heard from above and then down through the opening plunged another huge wolf.

Before the startled combatants could strike a blow at the savage and half-famished intruder, the animal, sending forth another wild howl, sprang from the table at his blood-stained fellow beast and commenced tearing away at his flesh.

When the wolf plunged down, Frank and his two friends, as if acting from a common impulse, sprang back to defend the helpless young girls from the beast.

The captain of the Wolves, having secured another sword, was about to spring on the famished animal, when another savage howl from above arrested his attention.

All eyes were turned aloft again and another huge wolf was seen clinging to the top of the rope and tearing away at it with his teeth as if gnawing at a living foe.

"We are beset by a ferocious pack," cried the horrified captain.

He had scarcely uttered the words when the wolf dropped on the table, bringing the rope down with him with a clatter that increased the fearful uproar.

Then other fearful howls were heard and down plunged four more of the fierce beasts, attracted by the scent of the blood of their dead companion, as well as by the desire of glutting their craving appetites on the bodies of the human beings.

Then the human wolves appeared to be seized with terror and consternation, as they were ignorant of the number of the ravenous beasts they would be compelled to encounter.

Frank DeLacy appeared to be the only one in the cave who retained his composure.

With an undaunted courage and great presence of mind, he conceived the idea of profiting by the fearful intrusion.

Bounding over the wolves, who were tearing away at the dead beast, he landed on the table, seized one of the lamps and then sprang back to his friends again, as he cried: "This way, my brave companions. We will retreat by the inner passage, leaving wolves to devour wolves, as is but just."

Pushing his two friends and the young girls before him, Frank entered the inner cave, closing the half shattered door after him and bearing the lamp in his left hand, while he held a sword in the other.

"There's the passageway out," he cried, as he pointed to a small secret door which had been left open by the Wolves. "Good, Michael, you lead the way, the ladies will follow you, and we will bring up the rear. Take the lamp, my brave Marie."

"You are a noble soul," cried the advancing girl. "Hereafter I can worship you."

"Hasten—hasten! We will defend the passage against the wolves, be they savage beasts or human fiends. Ha—'tis dog eat dog inside now. If the beasts should devour the others, what a just retribution. On, on with you, my good friends."

As the five friends pushed boldly into the passage they could hear the howls and the yells of the men and the beasts in the other cave, mingling with the clashing of steel and the report of firearms.

The beasts had turned from the dead carcass to attack the living Wolves.

The wolves of France are ferocious beasts when driven to madness by starvation during severe winter storms.

They are often known to attack hamlets and villages and travelers are compelled to herd in bodies and keep well supplied with weapons, when journeying through the dense woods.

The six famished creatures who had followed the trail of their slain companion were of the most ravenous species.

While the old charcoal burner was following the human wolves as they bore Frank back to the cave he kept at a safe distance behind.

Old Michael was an expert hunter, as well as an old campaigner, and he was enabled to follow the horsemen with safety.

He watched the robbers as they led their horses down into a sheltered ravine, where the animals were secured to trees and covered with blankets.

He saw them ascending from the ravine and cross over into the grove of young trees, bearing their blindfolded prisoner with them.

As the old man was hesitating as to his future course in behalf of his young friend, he saw the fresh footprints of a large wolf on the path before him.

The solitary animal had strayed away from his pack and he was on the track of the horses in the ravine.

As there was no other offer for the government for the head of each slain wolf, the old woodsman, in the excitement of the chase, forgot the mission he had undertaken in behalf of his young friend and started in pursuit of his prey.

Down in the ravine a commotion arose among the horses, as the wolf sprang at one of the affrighted animals.

Drawing his ax, old Michael dashed fearlessly down and assailed the ferocious beast.

With one blow of his weapon he opened the wolf's head, just as the animal had seized the horse by the throat.

Half blinded by the blood and almost crazed with pain, the beast fled before the brave old man, who was enabled to track him by the red stain on the snow, as well as by the footprints.

The animal led the hunter a long, circuitous chase, and he finally disappeared in the clump of young trees before mentioned.

Still following the clear marks, Michael found himself at the entrance of the cavern of the human Wolves, the covering thereto having been pushed aside by the animal as he sought refuge in the passage.

Nothing daunted, the old man pushed into the passage, holding his hunter's knife ready to plunge it into the wounded wolf, as he muttered to himself:

"The vampire must be near dead, judging from the blood on the snow. I'll have his head for certain."

And now it can be easily understood why the wounded wolf appeared in the cave.

The other members of the roaming pack had struck the bloody trail and they followed it with unerring scent until they plunged down into the cave of the robbers.

When Frank and his friends retreated to the inner cave the hungry wolves were engaged in devouring their dead companion.

The captain of the human Wolves, who was not a man to remain long dismayed or inactive in danger, soon realized that he must lead his men after the fugitives.

But the savage animals were between them and the inner cave and the rope was lying useless on the table below the trap.

"We must dash through the beasts," cried the captain. "Make a dash for the door, my brave friends, slay them if they do not give way. We must retake our prisoners at all hazards."

And the human Wolves made a combined rush forward and the beasts retreated to the door as if instinct prompted them to smell an opening to the free woods outside.

"Fire at them," yelled the captain, as he saw that the animals crowded at the door; "and then at them with your swords. Every instant's delay increases our danger. Aim at their throats as they spring at you."

A volley rang out on the moment and two of the beasts received wounds in their bodies.

The onslaught served to madden the already infuriated beasts, while the taste of blood increased their savage appetites.

Sending forth fierce howls, they sprang to meet their human assailants, only to receive dreadful thrusts in their throats and breasts.

The captain of the resolute band dispatched a beast with one thrust, as he yelled:

"Slaughter them—slaughter them! Then we'll away after our prey. Perdition—we are destroyed if they escape."

The struggle was fearful; but the beasts could not cope with the desperate and well trained human foes.

In less than five minutes the six animals were lying dead on the floor and but one of the band had received a wound in return.

"They will serve as new suits for us," cried the captain, wiping his blood-stained sword on the back of one of the dead beasts. "Let the wounded remain here. The others will follow me on the instant. Bring along that rope and light the torches. Now death to our human enemies will be our cry."

Frank and his friends had reached the mouth of the pass-

the moment when the wolves were about to attack the beasts.

"No, Michael!" he cried, "you must be our guide. Lead us to the nearest village and your reward will be great."

"More than the head of the animal would bring me?"

"A hundred times more."

"Then down with me to the ravine and we will find the horses. It is more than a league to the village and the snow is deep for the tender-footed ladies."

"Where is the ravine?"

"Here to the right."

"Hasten, then—hasten! Marié, allow me to assist you. Louis, you will take charge of the other load."

The five friends hastened to the ravine as fast as possible, where they found the horses safely secured.

"I could not have found my way here," said Louis to Frank, "but I was guided by the stars."

"Mount, mount," said Frank. "The infernal fiends may soon be on us. Is there another path out of the ravine, Michael?"

"There is a narrow path, but it is very dangerous."

"For heaven's sake, let us away out, then, ere they block our way with the sword's points. Marie, they must not seize you again while I live."

The five friends then descended the ravine, the horses following behind them, hoping on horseback.

As only two horses could move abreast in the narrow path from the ravine, Michael led the way with Frank and his friends behind.

"Do you see anything of the fiends, Michael?" asked Frank, as they neared the woods at the end of the ravine path.

"I do not see them. But hark! Ah, there they come. They have blocked up the path above, the rascals."

"How many are there?"

"I find a dozen at least."

"Then, for heaven's sake, let us away out, then, ere they block our way with the sword's points. Marie, they must not seize you again while I live."

CHAPTER VIII.

OUR YOUNG HERO STARTS ON ANOTHER ADVENTUROUS EXPEDITION.

The sun was shining on the snow-covered ground on the following morning, when five travelers rode into Versailles.

Two females rode in advance, while two men paced their horses slowly after them, supporting a wounded man on his horse.

The wounded man was the gallant Frank Delacy and his supporters were Louis Rich and the brave old soldier.

While making the last burst against the Wolves Frank received a fearful shock on the side of the head at the hands of the captain.

The three men and the two girls burst through the members of the fearful band and escaped out to the nearest village, closely pursued by their inveterate enemies, two of whom had received cuts in the last affray.

Frank's wounds were dressed by Rich's physician and he was placed in a chamber of the palace, where he was nursed by the affectionate Marie.

A party of ladies, under the influence of old Rich, rode to the den in the woods; but the Wolves had disappeared, bearing their wounded with them, and not leaving a trace behind to guide in their pursuit.

Two weeks elapsed and the brave young soldier had reported for duty again, being restored to full health and strength.

Richieu had praised him for his noble bearing. Marie was

pledged to become his wife; he was the hero of the day; and yet he was not happy.

The Wolves were not dispersed.

They were at work again and they were as daring and more murderous than before.

Frank had scarcely opened his eyes on a certain morning when a page entered his room and informed him that Richieu wished to see him as soon as possible.

Frank hastened to attend the great man.

"Captain DeLaey," commenced Richieu, as he held a letter in his hand, "I will inform you that the wolves were out again last night."

"Who is their victim on this occasion, your grace?"

"My niece and Theresa Lamar."

"Your niece and Theresa Lamar! Can it be possible that they have been seized again?"

"It is certain. Marie, as you know, went to Paris yesterday to pay a visit to her friend, Theresa, to whom she has become attached. The banker's house was broken into last night, his treasures were taken, he was himself abused and the young ladies were forcibly dragged away."

"This is monstrous!"

"It is monstrous; yet there is more to be told. Here is a letter which I received this morning from the captain of the band, in which my life is threatened unless I dismiss certain of my favorites, yourself among the number. I am also called on for a fabulous sum of money as a ransom for Marie. The Wolves must perish one and all. I will not give way to them one inch."

"I would lose all respect for you if you did, your grace," said Frank, as his eyes flashed with fury. "I will set out against them again with your permission."

"Have you formed any plans?"

"I have not. I must have a short time for reflection."

"Is your health fully recovered?"

"Fully, your grace. Have I your permission to work against those fiends as I please?"

"You have my full approbation. Use the arms and the treasure of the state as you will in crushing the wretches. I have the utmost confidence in you, yet I would not advise you to seek them without company again."

"I will not, your grace. Have your suspicions fallen on any of the courtiers?"

"They have not. I know that I have mortal enemies around me, but I cannot connect any of them with this atrocious band."

"Yet I am assured that the leader, at least, is inspired by some one of your powerful rivals here in court."

"That may be true, yet how are we to prove the fact, unless we can succeed in recognizing the rascally leader?"

"You are aware that all their late victims have been your warm adherents. My life has been threatened and now your fair niece has been seized again. Oh, may heaven inspire me with an idea for their destruction."

"That is also my fervent prayer. Retire and meditate as you must act promptly."

Frank retired to the adjoining library and flung himself on a chair.

Picking up the nearest book lying on a table near by, he found that it was an old copy descriptive of birds and beasts.

Opening the pages at random Frank's eye was soon attracted to a paragraph, and he commenced to read it with interest.

"The Irish wolf dog," the description read, "is a sagacious animal, powerful in form and ferocious in combat. He is keen of scent, possessing wonderful endurance while in pursuit of his natural prey, and faithful to the death in defending his master's herds against the ravenous wolves."

The young man flung the book on the table, sprang up, clapping his hands in glee, as he exclaimed, in joyous tones:

"I have been inspired. Ravenous Wolves, I will soon be on your track, and I will pursue like unto the faithful shepherd dog spoken of in the book."

Richelieu was somewhat surprised to see Frank back in his private apartment again.

"What would you, my son?" he asked, as he saw the brave face glowing with animation.

"I would have you summon as many good tailors as possible to your private apartments, your grace, and have them placed under my orders. They must be sworn to secrecy and kept in confinement until I release them."

"That is a strange request, yet it will be complied with."

"I would have you give me an order for the enlistment of the certain number of brave men I may require, whom I will select from among my own trusted friends."

"It will be as you desire. Anything more to aid you?"

"Some gold."

"My coffers are at your disposal. I will give you an order on the treasurer."

"That will not answer. I must not be noticed doing anything remarkable. The Wolves have their spies in this very palace."

"Then I will draw what you wish and hand it to you in secret, my son. Will you not explain your new venture?"

"I may not, your grace. If I fail my death will be the punishment. If I succeed, then you will know all. And, now, I must be acting in haste without betraying the fact."

Frank retired and strolled into the garden attached to the palace, where old Michael, the charcoal burner, was then employed at very light work.

The old man had received a substantial reward from those whom he had so bravely assisted and he was honored in other ways.

Frank soon met the old man and they consulted together in apparently careless tones, while taking care that no eavesdroppers should overhear them.

Then Frank sought Louis Real, with whom he also consulted.

Old Michael had not paid a visit to the neighborhood of his hut since the night of his adventures with the Wolves.

He surmised that some of the lawless characters frequenting the tavern were in league with the band, if not actual members thereof, and Frank was of the same opinion.

To venture back there alone would be only too apt to invite their vengeance, and the old fellow kept safe in the outhouse garden of the palace.

On a certain evening, however, the landlord of the tavern was surprised to see Michael riding up to the inn, mounted on a good horse and bearing a heavy fellow's pack behind his saddle.

After the usual greetings were interchanged the old woodman called for refreshments, ordered his horse to be cared for and then added:

"I'm in fortune now, my host. I remain with you to-night. To-morrow I will away on a tour with a fine assortment of goods."

"But do you not fear the Wolves?" asked the landlord, in cautious tones. "I understand they are out again."

"To the mischief with the dastardly dogs, I say. Did I not defy them before? Ha! but that was a lucky adventure for me. I have lined my purse well. Come and drink good wine with me, friends all. We'll drink perdition to the cowardly pack."

Five rough-looking fellows were in the tavern at the time, three of whom Michael knew as hard working woodsmen.

The landlord cautioned him again and again to be more cau-

tious in his talk, but the old man's tongue increased in violence as he poured the wine down.

At length, about ten o'clock, Michael asserted that he would retire.

The landlord escorted him into a large back room on the second floor and the old fellow was soon locked in slumber, or he pretended to be, at least.

He had not even taken the precaution of locking the door of his room, where his pack of goods stood on the floor.

The wily old man had noticed that two strangers had retired from the tavern early in the night, while his friends did not leave until after he withdrew to the bedroom.

The landlord was about closing his doors when he was startled by hearing a footstep in the room behind him, and, on turning round, he encountered old Michael with a drawn sword in one hand and a pistol in the other.

"What ails thee, Michael?" he asked, as the old fellow advanced in a threatening manner. "Have you turned robber?"

"Yes, for the time. You are my prisoner and you must do my bidding."

"You jest, old man."

"I do not jest. I am of the opinion that you are in league with the robbers. Obey me, or I will slay you like a wolf."

Michael spoke as one who was determined, and the landlord was terrified.

"What would you have me do?" he asked.

"Shut the door and come up to my room. Bring a bottle of wine with you."

The landlord obeyed the order, not comprehending whether the old man was acting a drunken freak or playing a deeper game.

Then Michael forced the man, who was about his own age and appearance, to drink a large goblet of wine, into which he had dropped a sleeping potion.

The landlord was soon asleep in Michael's bed, while the latter was stealing to the apartment where the old wife was snoring.

Arousing the old woman on the instant, Michael held his sword to her throat as he cried: "You old witch, I have come to punish you for your sins."

"In mercy, what am I guilty of?" gasped the old creature.

"You and your husband are in league with the foul Wolves. We know all. He would not confess and he has been put to death."

"Spare me and I will confess all I know. Oh, and that is not much."

"What do you know? Speak freely on the instant or I will strike."

"What do you wish to know?"

"Was your husband a Wolf?"

"On my soul, he was not."

"Was he in league with them in any way?"

"He feared them and was compelled to give them information."

"Do you know any of them?"

"As I hope for mercy, I do not."

"Did your husband know them?"

"He never looked on the face of a member of the vile band."

"Do they visit here?"

"Yes, when they expect prey."

"Was your husband aware when they would pay him a visit?"

"He was never informed. They would dash to the door and demand admittance. They would drink of his wine and fling him money."

"Did they ever seize any of your guests?"

"Several."

"How would they act?"

"They would enter and demand where such a person slept."

Then they would steal to the room, bind and gag him and drag him forth."

"Did they murder here?"

"Never. They always dragged their victims away to their dens in the forest."

"Does your husband strike a light when they enter here?"

"Very rarely, unless they demand wine."

"That is all we seek to know. Now I will bind and gag you. Attempt to utter a cry until you are released and you will meet your fate."

Having secured the trembling old creature, Michael put aside his outer clothing and arrayed himself in the landlord's night gown and cap.

Then he put out the light and took a station at the front window.

As the hour of midnight approached, out from the forest near by thirteen wolfish figures emerged at full gallop.

They were all mounted on good horses and one of them led another animal beside.

Three of the Wolves halted on the side of the road fifty yards from the tavern and the others rode on.

On gaining the house, five of the band drew up, while the other three rode on for some distance before they stopped.

Six of the band were thus keeping guard as the captain demanded admittance by knocking at the door of the tavern with the hilt of his sword.

"Who calls?" asked a voice from the inside, as a white-capped head was thrust out.

"The Wolves; open on the instant."

"Most graciously."

The door was soon opened and the captain demanded:

"Where does old Michael, the charcoal burner, sleep? Guide us to his room on the instant."

"With pleasure. Will you not partake of some wine, my honored guests?"

"Not to-night, as we are in haste."

In less than five minutes after the sleepy landlord was gagged and bound and placed on the spare horse, and then away into the depths of the forest dashed the Wolves.

Three minutes more had scarcely elapsed when out from behind a wood at the back of the tavern rode thirteen other strange-looking horsemen, and they also rode into the forest after the Wolves.

The strangers were arrayed, from head to foot, in costumes made up of the skins of large hunting dogs, and their heads were covered with masks made up of the same material.

"Can you track them, Michael?" asked one of the foremost of the riders.

"For certain, brave captain."

"Then we will run them to their den and surprise the fiends there. The Wolf-hounds are after the Wolves and the death cries of the fiends will ring out to-night."

CHAPTER IX.

ON THE TRACK OF THE WOLVES AND INTO ONE OF THEIR DENS.

On through the forest path the murderous Wolves rode, and on after them rode the vengeance-seeking Hounds.

The ground was covered with snow and the path through the trees was dark and dreary enough, yet the brave-hearted Frank DeLacy felt his heart bounding merrily as he pushed on after the unknown foes.

Old Michael was also in excellent humor, as he had entered into the sport with great zest, willingly undertaking one of the most dangerous positions in the very hazardous enterprise.

Louis Reul and ten other brave and daring soldiers of the

guard completed the band of Hounds who were in full pursuit of the marauding Wolves.

It was an easy matter for old Michael to track his game through the wood, as the horses of the Wolves left clear prints in the snow.

After advancing some ten miles through the dense forest the old guide pulled up and peered ahead in a cautious manner.

"Do you fear an ambuscade?" asked Frank, pulling up with him.

"Not exactly. The rogues are making for their den. Can you not hear the flow of the river ahead?"

"What does that indicate?"

"The rendezvous may be on the bank of the river. Who can tell? We must now advance in a cautious way."

"Would it not be well," said Frank, "to order a halt here and some few of us advance to reconnoitre?"

"A wise suggestion. I will guide you on foot," said old Michael.

"Then we will advance together. The others will remain here, and advance when they hear my signal. Come on."

Frank sprang from his horse at the moment and he was soon pushing on through the wood with the old guide.

They were soon on the bank of the river.

"The tracks disappear here," said the old man. "They could not have forded the deep stream on this cold night. They must have embarked on a large flat boat."

And the old fellow peered down the stream as he spoke.

"What is to be done then? We have not a boat to follow them."

The old fellow shrugged his shoulders ere he rejoined:

"We may follow them if we wish to take a cold bath. I've got an idea."

"Let me hear it."

"They have taken to the island, I'll wager a wolf's head."

"What island?"

"Wolves Island. You can perceive it when we move down to the bend of the river. Yes, yes; that must be their rendezvous."

And the old guide walked along the river side, followed by Frank.

When they had reached the bend, the old man pointed to an island half a mile below, as he said:

"Our rogues are there, I'll warrant you. And a fit place it is. No one ever ventures there in the winter."

"Is there a house on it?"

"Yes, an old mill."

"But is there no bridge from the bank?"

"There was one, years ago, when the old mill was in play. The island is haunted as well as infested by the four-legged wolves. It is a very savage spot."

"And just the spot where the fiends would be likely to rendezvous. We must get to it at all hazards."

Frank spoke as a man who was determined to push ahead at all hazards.

Old Michael kept staring at the island and rubbing his hands at the same time, as if hoping for an inspiration.

"We must get at the Wolves to-night?" he asked.

"Yes, we must, if we have to build a launch here in the woods or swim over to that accursed island. Where is the nearest boat to be found, think you?"

"At the ferry, four miles below."

"That will not do. We must get there in some other way. What is the distance from the island to the bank on this side?"

"Some forty yards."

"Then I have it. Let us summon our friends and move on."

Some twenty minutes after, Frank and his friends were consulting in a grove opposite the island.

"That is all arranged," said the young leader, at length.

"Louis, old Michael and I will swim over and reconnoitre. If we can steal away the boat we will pull back for you. If that is not possible you must swim to the upper point there on hearing our signal."

Slipping into the cold water, the three Hounds struck out for the island.

Frank was the first to touch ground on a clump of tall reeds, and his two friends were close behind him.

Without uttering a word they drew themselves up on the bank, took a draught of brandy each, and set out to investigate.

They had not proceeded far in search of the boat when they struck a small inlet leading up to the old mill.

Then, on peering through the trees surrounding the decayed building, they perceived a dim light.

"We have them," whispered Frank. "If we could get the boat to land our friends with their pistols and carbines."

"There it is," said old Michael, pointing to a large, flat-bottomed boat at the end of the inlet, and near the old building. "Be careful in your movements now. Will we attempt to steal the craft at once?"

"I think we had better first see what the fiends are about in the mill," suggested Frank, as he moved toward the building with stealthy steps.

The old guide felt that it was a perilous step, yet he followed the others, holding a sword in one hand and a large knife in the other.

Frank and Louis were armed with swords and daggers, having left their pistols behind when taking to the water.

Not a word was spoken as they moved on.

Wild weeds and bushes filled the yard around the mill and creeping vines almost covered the shuttered windows.

Frank found it an easy matter to crawl to one of the windows and his two friends were soon beside him.

Peering in through the window, they beheld the Thirteen Wolves seated around a large table, over which a lamp was hanging, while a man, who was bound to a chair, was reclining therein as if asleep.

Although the man had a night cap drawn over the upper part of his face, old Michael soon recognized him as the landlord of the inn.

It was evident, from the attitude of the Wolves, that they had not yet discovered who their prisoner was, as they were engaged in a sociable manner, drinking freely from the wine cups before them.

"It is time to settle with that old spy," said the captain. "Rouse the rascal till he learns his doom. Old Pierre must have given him a strong dose of the drug. Arouse the old wretch."

Two of the Wolves sprang at the sleeping man, dragged the cap from his head and commenced to rub his ears in a very violent manner.

The old landlord grumbled in his sound sleep as he muttered:

"What ails thee, Jean? It is not the hour for rising."

The captain of the Wolves sprang up on the instant and stood staring at the old prisoner, as he yelled, in furious tones:

"What have we here? What treachery is on foot to-night?"

"What is the trouble, captain?"

"Why, don't you see that this is not the spy we were after. This is old Pierre, the landlord of the inn. Perdition seize us all, if there's not treachery on foot. Prick that old fool with your swords. Some of you go out and watch the banks."

Then there was great excitement, yet little or no confusion.

The Wolves acted as men accustomed to alarms and surprises.

The old landlord yelled with pain when he found the points of the swords jabbing his flesh and then he sprang up, crying:

"Jean, Jean, woman—how dare you stick your knitting needles in me?"

And then he stared around at the Wolves with a terrified countenance.

"How came it that we found you in the peddler's bed?" demanded the captain in ominous tones. "Have you also become leagued with our enemies?"

"Holy Virgin protect me, but I know not what has happened since Michael made me drink the wine in his room," was the landlord's reply, as he fell on his knees, the chain still clinging to him. "That old vassal must have bewitched me. Where am I, good Wolves?"

"Where you will not leave in a hurry, I am certain. Down into the cellar with the old knave and secure him there."

Frank and his friends were still at the window, deeming themselves safe there for the time, especially as some of the band were out on the watch.

To Frank's disappointment, not one of the Wolves had removed their savage masks.

"If we are compelled to swim back again," thought the young leader, "it would have been a great point to get a look at the villainous captain's face."

To steal the boat in the face of the alarm would be to invite a combat where three would have to contend against thirteen.

The weeds and bushes around the window afforded the spies a good hiding place, even if their presence on the island was suspected.

After the landlord had been removed the captain said:

"I do not apprehend any cause of alarm on account of this trick, even though old Michael saw us bearing him away—as he did. Who can track us to this island? The boat leaves no mark on the water."

The scouts sent out on the small island soon returned to report that there was not the least sign of life along the banks of the river.

"Take your seat, Wolves," cried the captain, "as I am certain we are safe on this ghostly island. We will now proceed to deal with our great prisoner."

"The great prisoner," said Frank to himself, as he nudged the others. "Whom can they have recently taken?"

The three watchers at the window held their breaths and they could hardly refrain from bursting out into exclamations of surprise when they saw two of the Wolves leading in the "great prisoner."

It was Richelieu himself.

The greatest statesman and captain of his age—the man whose power in France was greater than that of the king himself—was in the power of the murderous Wolves.

Frank's first impulse—after the first shock was over—was to spring in, sword in hand, to the rescue of the great minister.

Louis Real held him by the hand, however, as he whispered:

"Wait and watch. As a last resort, we will dash in. I will steal down and give the signal."

Frank held his breath, pressed his arm in assent and watched those inside.

Louis stole away to give the signal.

All thought of stealing the boat was now abandoned, as it would take their united efforts to work it to the bank.

The great statesman could not be left at the mercy of his murderous enemies, even for a brief time.

"Welcome to the den of the Wolves, Richelieu," cried the captain in sneering tones. "Place a chair for his eminence."

Richelieu's arms were bound behind his back as he was dragged forward.

"I decline to be seated in such vile company," he replied, in clear tones, as his stern old countenance was turned on the leader of the band, as if he would penetrate through his disguise. "You are but cowardly animals at best, to thus strike at an old soldier."

"That old soldier has struck at his enemies without mercy, and——"

"Traitor, I have never struck but at the enemies of France."

"You are aiming at the destruction of France," cried the leading Wolf. "But we brought you not here to exchange arguments; you are in our power, and you must do our bidding."

"What do you require?" asked the prisoner, with a defiant sneer.

"You must swear, in the most solemn manner, to obey our commands in all things."

"What will your demands be?"

"You must dismiss all the favorites in the court and in the army whom we may name."

"That is a modest request. What else do you require?"

"You must pay a sum of money into the treasury of the Wolves triple that demanded for the ransom of your daughter, known as Marie Rochefort."

"You are the soul of moderation. Pray proceed with your requests."

"You must give that daughter in marriage to the person mentioned by us, no matter what his rank or fortune may be."

"A most gracious suggestion. You aim to win the lady's hand, I presume?"

"Perforce I may. That will be arranged hereafter. Furthermore—"

"Oh, and you are not finished yet," interrupted the old statesman. "Well, proceed with your requests."

"You must swear to grant the pardon of all the prisoners we may name."

"In a word," cried the old minister, "you demand that I will be the abject slave of the greatest band of cut-throats that ever disgraced a great nation?"

A savage growl burst from the Wolves on hearing this insult, but the captain silenced them as he cried:

"Silence! We will be avenged on the old tyrant. We will demand more. Know you, Cardinal Richelieu, that we are the noblest band of patriots in France. In addition to what we have requested, we demand your resignation and retirement from public life."

"And what if I refuse to comply with each and all of your demands?"

"You will suffer death, accompanied by the most fearful of tortures."

A scornful smile passed over Richelieu's face as he rejoined:

"How long will you give me to consider your modest demands?"

"Five minutes."

"I do not require one second!" thundered the brave old man. "Fiends, traitors, murderers, I defy you. Your tortures will not wring a single favor from me. I would suffer a million deaths ere I would concede one favor to such savage, brutal assassins!"

"We will see," said the captain. "Drag in the lady prisoner."

The words were scarcely uttered when Marie was dragged into the room.

"You must love your own flesh and blood, Richelieu?" cried the brutal captain of the brutish band.

Richelieu looked at the young girl with a fatherly glance, but he did not offer a reply to the question.

"Know, then, tyrant," cried the captain, "that your own daughter will perish before your eyes if you do not comply. We will torture her to death, as we propose to torture you. Will you comply?"

"No, no! Dogs, you will not dare injure that innocent lady."

"Will we not? Drag her to the torture. Will you not intercede with your father for your life, young lady?"

"I will not," was the brave girl's reply.

"Then you must both die. Drag forth the rack and the implements. We will soon force her to intercede."

At that moment Louis returned to Frank's side and whispered:

"I have given the signal and they are coming to us. Have patience."

"How can flesh and blood stand it longer?" returned our hero.

Then the astonished Wolves heard the frail window falling in with a crash and into the room sprang a man in the garb of a hound, yelling furiously:

"In on them, brave Hounds. Death to the coward Wolves."

CHAPTER X.

THE HOUNDS AND THE WOLVES IN THE ISLAND DEN.

Louis Real sprang in after Frank, and wild and fierce were the yells he sent forth as he dashed to his friend's side, crying:

"To the rescue! Death to the assassins! In on them here, Hounds!"

The old guide remained outside for a few moments sending forth so many loud barks and howls that one would have imagined that a legion of hounds had sprung suddenly on the wolf-infested island.

Before the Wolves could recover from their surprise Frank had struck down the men who were holding Richelieu, while Louis dashed aside those who were dragging Marie to the torturing rack.

The old warrior's bonds were cut at once and his hands were scarcely free before he had grasped a sword from one of the fallen Wolves, as he cried:

"Bravely done, noble Hounds. Now at the brutes with a vengeance."

At that juncture the old guide sprang in on all-fours, sending forth his fierce barks as he moved to the side of his friends.

Then cry after cry was heard from the river, where the others were landing with all haste.

"We are beset!" cried the captain of the band, springing on the table, sword in hand.

One flash of the sword and the lamp was shattered into a hundred pieces.

Then all was darkness and confusion.

Yet above all that confusion could be heard the voice of the captain, crying:

"Rally, Wolves, rally! Drag away your companions who are wounded. We will defeat the dogs yet. To the secret chamber!"

"Out with us," whispered Frank to his friends, as he drew Marie toward the window. "This way, your grace; we'll soon have aid at hand."

Two minutes after and the cardinal was standing outside the window with the dripping Hounds around him.

"Secure the boat," cried Frank, "and they cannot escape."

The boat was secured and then pushed down the inlet to the end of the island.

While four of the Hounds were performing that task, Richelieu, Marie and the others had withdrawn to the shelter of the trees, near the mill yard.

"How many men have you here, my gallant protector?" asked Richelieu.

"Thirteen in all, your grace," answered Frank, "but they are all heroes."

"Two of the Wolves are wounded; yet we must exaggerate our numbers. We must exterminate the beasts and rescue the other prisoners in the cellars. How silent the rascals are keeping within. What arms have you?"

"As we swam to the island we were compelled to leave our carbines and pistols behind, your grace."

Then some of the Hounds asserted that they had preserved their pistols in a dry state under the skins of the Hounds.

"I can now understand why he had taken us for so many tailors, Captain DeLacy. 'Twas a novel idea."

"We'll hunt the Wolves to death, your grace."

"That is right. I beg that you will elect me as your chief."

"Assuredly, your grace. We are ready to obey your orders."

"Where are the knaves' horses?"

"In the outhouses, your grace."

"Secure them and lead them here to the wood. We will leave two of the men in charge of them and the young lady. Then we will charge in and find the secret chamber the fiend mentioned."

"I fancy that was but a ruse on his part," said Frank.

"It may be. At all risks we must rescue the prisoners. Follow me."

And the old captain moved toward the main door of the mill.

"Is it well to thus risk your precious life, your grace?" pleaded Frank. "Besides, we have a pride in——"

"That is well, but I will share in the exploit. Forward!"

The old guide had managed to light some torches with a flint and steel and the foremost of the Hounds held the lights.

When they entered the inner room they found that the wounded men had been removed and there was not the slightest trace of the other Wolves.

Leaving three of their number to guard the door, Richelieu led the others down into the cellars.

"There were two other prisoners besides Marie in this apartment," he said, as he gazed about the empty cellar.

"And there will be others there soon," cried a voice, as if coming from the floor beneath them. "You are all doomed. Not a soul will leave the island of the Wolves alive."

"Cowards," cried Richelieu, "why do you not appear and give us battle?"

"We can conquer you without wasting another drop of blood, tyrant. We are not idiots to expose ourselves."

"Up with you," cried Frank, in some alarm. "Heavens, the iron door is closed upon us."

"Burst it open," cried Richelieu. "We are not in a trap."

"You are caught in a trap," cried the voice from below. "Tyrant, the Wolves are not yet exterminated."

Some of the Hounds flung themselves against the iron door which had closed on them, while others glared around the gloomy cellar.

And then they all listened, as if expecting to hear the sounds of strife above, when the Wolves would rush on the sentinels at the door.

But another sound broke on their ears.

It was a cry for warning and for help and it came from below.

"That's Theresa Lamar's voice," cried Louis Real, "and it comes from below."

"The secret apartment is under here," said Frank. "There must be a trapdoor."

"Flash the lights," cried Richelieu, "and look to your arms. The villains may be soon out at our friends."

There were four men in all outside and ten in the cellar.

Frank was examining the floor with careful eyes when the cry of alarm from below broke on them again.

"The trapdoor must be here," cried Frank, as he discovered a small ring in the floor.

He immediately seized the ring, pulled up a door and a small ladder was exposed.

"Down with us," cried Frank, sword in one hand and torch in the other.

He soon gained the lower apartment, only to find it empty.

Perceiving a door on the side of the under cellar, the gallant young hero sprang at it, crying:

"There's an exit this way. Follow me, my dear friends."

Richelieu and the others were close at his heels as he dashed through the underground passage and the chilly night breeze swept against them as they ran along.

Frank soon led the way into the wood, where the slashing of swords, the cries of combatants, and the screams of alarm from Marie soon fell on his ears.

Dashing toward the scene of the conflict, with the others close behind, he found two of the Hounds stretched on the ground.

"Where is the young lady?" he cried, as he glanced around.

"The boat," gasped the wounded Hound. "They have taken the lady and the horses. At them, brave captain."

Without waiting for the others, Frank ran along toward the opening of the inlet, crying:

"To the rescue, friends."

The flatboat was moving from the island as Frank reached the opening of the inlet.

With another cry he gave a tremendous bound and landed on the stern of the boat.

Before he could steady himself, however, he received a blow on the head and fell back into the water.

Sinking to the bottom, he recovered his presence of mind and struggled to gain the surface, still retaining his sword in his grasp.

Then he felt himself seized by strong hands and he raised his weapon to strike, crying:

"Friends, I will struggle to the end."

"Hold, Frank—'tis I," cried a friendly voice, as he was dragged up out of the water.

"Where are the Wolves?"

"They have escaped on the boat. Are you injured?" cried Richelieu.

"Not at all. Have the beasts escaped? And Marie?"

"She is a prisoner. But we will soon rescue her. Oh, they are fiends."

And the great statesman stamped on the ground with rage.

"What is our loss, your grace?" asked Frank, as he gazed around on his diminished band.

"There are three wounded and one killed, my brave young friend. We are prisoners here for the present. The boat is floating down the stream with the miscreants and their prisoners. We were not in time to stay them."

"Oh, the wretches, the wretches!" groaned Frank. "To think that they should thus escape us."

"They will not escape you if you maintain courage and caution," said a soft voice, as a female form emerged from the trees.

"How can you tell, stranger?" demanded Richelieu, advancing to the woman.

"Because it so predicted. Will your grace follow me?"

"Who are you?"

"I was once a prisoner of the Wolves and I am now their slave. Follow me to the mill and I will tell you more."

"Why to the mill?"

"Because you all require warmth and nourishment and you cannot gain the bank until morning. If you would crush the demon Wolves you will prepare for them."

"Will we meet them again soon?"

"This very night or I am very much mistaken, your grace."

"Where and how?"

"They will return here to surprise and to slay you all. Deem not that you have seen the last of them to-night."

"We do not fear them," said the brave old warrior. "Lead the way to the mill and beware of treachery."

"I am not treacherous, save to those who have blighted my

existence," said the woman, in excited tones. "The Wolves I will betray."

The Hounds followed the strange woman to the old mill, bearing their wounded and dead with them.

Warned by the strange person's words, sentinels were immediately placed, so as to give warning of the return of the Wolves, without being themselves perceived.

When Richelieu and his rescuers reached the main room of the old mill, they found huge logs blazing on the broad hearth and bread and wine on the table.

Having dressed the wounds of their companions, which were not of a serious nature, the other Hounds gathered around Richelieu, who was interrogating the strange woman.

This person was dressed in very plain garments and it was apparent that she was suffering from some great mental excitement, although her actions were easy and she spoke in a calm, determined manner.

She was about twenty-five years of age and she retained some traces of early beauty on her deathly pale face.

"If you will listen to what I have to tell, your grace," she said, "I will tell you what I know of the Wolves."

"Most assuredly."

"Then be on the alert, for certainly will they return here to-night."

"Why are you so certain?"

"Listen and you will learn."

CHAPTER XI.

A DESPERATE ENCOUNTER SUCCEEDING A CUNNING STRATAGEM.

"I am a prisoner here," the strange woman commenced, "but I may be termed a willing captive now. Here is my brief story:

"I was the wife of a wealthy tradesman in Paris, who is many years older than myself. He was always very jealous and unreasonably suspicious. You know the man, your grace, but I will not mention his name.

"Two months ago we were driving at night from Versailles to Paris, when our carriage was suddenly attacked by a party of masked men. We were taken prisoners and robbed of our money and our jewels and then my husband was set free, the captain of the band telling him that he would have to pay a ransom for the release of his beautiful wife.

"On the following day, while I was a prisoner here, my husband received a letter demanding a fortune for my ransom. He became very indignant and swore that he would not pay a single gold piece.

"Through some secret means of communication he was informed that I would be put to death in six days if the demand was not complied with. My husband then addressed a letter to me, in which he stated that I was a false wife; that I was the instigator of the plot for my abduction; that the leader of the robbers was my paramour; and if I ever appeared before him again he would denounce me as the companion of robbers.

"You may readily understand that the letter was a crushing blow to an innocent woman. It crushed my heart forever. I came here against my will as pure as the snow. I remain here now of my own free will as the guilty companion of the leader of this band. You must understand my cruel position."

The woman addressed her conversation to Richelieu, who at once asked:

"But why have you not escaped and sought refuge with your friends?"

"Friends! I have no friends. I was an orphan when my husband married me. Besides, he branded me with infamy."

"Are you attached to the captain of the infamous band?"

"I despise and hate him. Oh, he is such a cruel wretch."

"Who and what is he? Please tell us all you know about him?"

"I cannot tell much about him. I only know that he occupies a high position at court, that he is a nobleman and that he is your mortal enemy."

"Will you describe his appearance?"

"That I cannot do, as I have never seen his face."

"That is astonishing."

"Not in the least. You must know, your grace, that when I first met this man he wore a mask, as did the other members of the band. They have since adopted the wolfish disguise. I have never looked on the face of either of them."

"That is remarkable. Do they often come to this island?"

"Sometimes twice and three times a week and then again they will not appear here for several days, as I understand they have several other retreats."

"Then they never unmask when here?"

"Never. The captain informs me that, to guard against treachery, no member of the band has ever seen his face, and yet he knows all the others."

"Then all the others are known to each other by countenance?"

"They are not. No. 2—that is, the second in rank—knows all the others save the captain. And so it runs. All the new members are known to the old. The last member has never seen the hideous masks removed from the twelve others."

"I understand. But you would be able to recognize the voice of the captain should you hear it in the outside world?"

"I do not think so, as he always speaks in disguised tones."

"Why do you now wish to betray these evil-minded men after having dwelt here for so many weeks?"

"Because my soul revolts at the atrocities committed here."

"Do you witness them?"

"Oh, no; yet I am aware of their committal, and I have often heard them plotting terrible crimes. I knew that your grace was to be seized to-night."

"You say the fiends will return to-night again. What reason have you for your assertion?"

"I heard the captain instructing the others when you were outside. They feared to attack you openly, although they were aware of your numbers."

"Then they are cowards?"

"Not exactly cowards. They will fight to the very death when they are compelled to, yet will they prefer strategy."

"Where have they gone?"

"I cannot say. They have other rendezvous in the neighborhood."

"Why should they return here?"

"The captain surmises that you will not leave the island until morning, as he knows you have no boats."

"Yet we all swam here," suggested Frank.

"You are young and vigorous, perhaps. It would fare ill with his grace here if he was compelled to swim the river on this cold night."

"Very true," said Richelieu. "Will the dogs come back in force, think you?"

"They never number more than thirteen and ten of them received wounds to-night. They will return, hoping to find you asleep and weary. They propose to fall on you and assassinate all save your grace."

"We will be prepared for them," said Richelieu. "My friends, here are carbines and pistols, let us be ready to give the wolves a bloody reception."

"If you will confide in me I will suggest a plan for an almost bloodless victory on your part," said the woman.

"What is your plan?"

A fire lamp was burning overhead and the logs on the fire-

place were blazing brightly as the woman expressed herself to Richelieu and the Hounds.

Her plan was a novel one and there was so much earnest sincerity in her manner that the austere Richelieu gave his consent at once.

"My good woman," he said, "I fully believe in the sincerity of your intentions. I will not appeal to you for our own sake, but I would have you remember that the lives of two innocent ladies depend on the success of your project."

"I am aware of it. Trust in me and you will all be saved. Besides, there was another prisoner borne out in whom I am most interested."

"Who was it?"

"My husband. He was captured two nights since."

"Is he aware that you were here?"

"He is not. He was brought here to force gold from him. I am most desirous that he should be rescued."

"Do you love him, then, after his unkind treatment of you?"

"I respect him as a steadfast and an honest man, even though he was unkind to me in thought. He will suffer death before he will resign his gold to the robbers and I would save him."

"We will save him. And now for our preparations. Then you will hasten to the tower."

"One word more, your grace."

"What is your wish?"

"If we succeed I will be allowed to go my way?"

"Most assuredly."

"And if any of these disguised gentlemen should recognize me hereafter, I beg that they will not know me?"

"I will promise for them."

"Then set to work, and then I will to the tower to watch. If you see the least appearance of treachery on my part, pray shoot me on the instant."

"We have no fear of treachery."

Some fifty minutes after the woman was stealing down to the riverside, just as two boats approached the island.

There were eleven men in the two boats and they wore the Wolfish garbs.

As the boats touched the island the woman emerged from the trees and advanced boldly to the boats.

"How fares it, Rachel?" asked the leader of the Wolves.

"All is well."

"Are they asleep?"

"Each and all of them."

"Have they removed their disguises?"

"They have not. They dried themselves at the fire, partook of the liquor and then fell asleep."

"Then you succeeded in drugging the good liquor?"

"Most admirably."

"And they did not suspect you."

"Why should they? Even the cunning cardinal was taken in."

"You are a treasure. Now, then, Wolves, we will up for vengeance. Rebecca, you will proceed ahead and give us warning should any of them be aroused in the meantime. Move on."

The woman tripped with a light and swift step and the Wolves followed after in single file, as the leader muttered to himself:

"That woman is a treasure. 'Tis strange that she should be so devoted to me without ever beholding my face. It must be that she recognized my voice on the night of her capture and that she was smitten with me before. Here we are."

Rebecca was there, standing at the main door, beckoning to the Wolves.

As the leader approached she whispered:

"They are all locked in slumber: your task will be an easy one. Remember that you are not to slay Richelieu at present."

"We will not slay him at present. We must use him."

Then the woman slipped upstairs and the captain stole into the main apartment, followed by his ten companions.

Each of the Wolves held a dagger in his hand as he silently took his allotted place.

Casting one glance around the room, the captain nodded his wolfish head in a significant manner.

It was very evident that he was well pleased with the spectacle before him.

On the large table stretched the dead Hound who had fallen at his post of duty.

The dead man's face was uncovered, and, as the captain gazed at it, he started back, as he muttered in tremulous tones:

"Mercy! Mercy! What a change! My own dear—— Well, I must not falter. 'Tis fate, 'tis fate!"

And then, with a nervous shrug, he turned his eyes on the others.

The lamp above was burning dimly and the logs were half smoldering on the broad hearth.

Around the table were seated twelve men, in different attitudes of slumber, and all wearing the houndish disguises.

The three wounded Hounds had bandages on their faces, and they were resting their heads on the table.

The others were sitting in different attitudes.

Some were leaning on their hands, which were resting on their knees; others had their heads flung back on their chairs, with their arms falling by their sides while others, again, rested their heads on the large table, in the same manner as the wounded men.

Having taken a rapid survey of the helpless Hounds, the captain turned his eyes on Richelieu.

The old warrior was reclining on two chairs at the side of the broad hearth, with his face fully exposed.

There was a smile on his stern face and the assassins could hear him mutter some indistinct words in his sleep.

Silently and with their daggers raised, the eleven Wolves took their stands behind as many of the slumbering Hounds.

At a sign from the captain the daggers were raised aloft.

Then out in the silent room rang that hoarse voice, crying: "Strike!"

Eleven daggers descended into the back and breasts of the silent figures beneath the Wolves.

The fatal word had scarcely been uttered by the captain of the Wolves when Richelieu bounded from the chairs and sprang to the side of the apartment, crying, in joyous tones:

"Fire, friends! Then in on the Wolfish fiends!"

From the windows and from the doors belched in a volley from the carbines, while at the same moment yells and howls assailed the fearfully startled Wolves.

Five of the would-be assassins fell before they had drawn the daggers from their supposed victims.

Then in from the doors and windows sprang ten soldiers in the undress of the guards, and with swords gleaming in their hands.

Who can imagine the consternation of the surprised Wolves, on being thus so unexpectedly assailed with fire and sword?

Yet there was one among them, who, even in that dread moment, did not lose his presence of mind, and that man was the leader of the band.

Before one of the soldiers could reach him his sword was flashing out of its sheath and he was crying in tones that gave courage to the survivors of the band:

"Rally around me, brave Wolves. Fight to the death if we must. Cleave your way through the rabble."

The remaining Wolves were instantly at his side, while their swords were drawn at the same moment.

"Down with the dogs!" yelled Richelieu, as he sprang into the fray with the others. "Take that fiend alive!"

Then there was a clashing of swords, mingled with groans

and curses, as the desperate Wolves attempted to fight their way to the door.

What desperate valor the captain of this band displayed in that struggle, and how fearfully he swept his sword around him!

Gaining the table, he sprang thereon, dashed out the lamp and then he was on the floor again with his followers.

Frank DeLacy sought in vain to reach the captain of the Wolves when the fierce fight was commenced, and when comparative darkness reigned, he yelled:

"Guard the doors and windows, brave friends. Let none out. Down with the Wolves!"

But the captain of the band, with four of his followers, had already gained the door.

"Light the torches!" cried Richelieu. "Not one of the fiends must escape."

And then all was still in the room, save the groans sent forth by the wounded.

Before the torches were lighted a female voice at the door cried:

"Quick! This way, friends. Some of the villains are escaping to the boats."

Frank sprang to the door, followed by five of his friends.

"This way! This way!" cried Rebecca, dashing along the path.

Frank and his friends were at her side in short order.

"How many escaped?" he asked.

"I cannot tell. The vile captain is among them. Ha! there they are, taking to one of the boats, and the other is adrift. Oh, wretches, vile wretches! You will yet suffer the just vengeance of heaven!"

"Traitor," yelled a hoarse voice from the boat, "meet your doom!"

And then a pistol shot rang out, followed by a cry of agony.

The unfortunate woman had fallen into Frank's arms and the boat containing the five Wolves was moving down the stream at a rapid rate of speed.

CHAPTER XII.

OUR HERO SETS OUT IN WHAT PROVED TO BE A DANGEROUS MISSION.

"Is she dead?" asked Richelieu, as he bent over the bleeding woman.

Frank and his friends had borne her back to the old mill and he was then reclining on three chairs.

"I fear so," replied Frank.

"I trust not. Let me examine the wound and I may tell. I am somewhat skilled in surgery."

And Richelieu proceeded to examine the wound in the woman's shoulder, displaying thereat great delicacy and skill.

The poor creature was insensible.

While Richelieu was thus engaged Frank proceeded to count his loss.

Fortunately, only one of the Hounds had received a wound in the last affray, while five of the Wolves lay dead on the floor and one was groaning in agony.

The wounded Wolf was instantly secured.

The woman is not dead," said Richelieu, at length, "and neither is the wound mortal. Let me have some wine."

When the wounded creature opened her eyes and glared around her first expression was:

"Has the captain escaped?"

"He has," replied Richelieu.

"Oh, what a misfortune!"

"Fear not, as we will soon have him in our power," said Richelieu, as he pointed to the wounded prisoner and the dead Wolves. "We will soon learn who he is."

"Not from me," said the wounded Wolf, in firm tones.

The man's covering had been torn from his head and so had three of the dead been treated.

"Do any of you recognize him?" asked the old minister.

The soldiers present stared at the prisoner in turn and each shook his head.

The man was about forty years of age, with a bold, wicked face and savage eyes.

"What are you?" asked Richelieu.

"A human being."

"What profession did you follow before you became a murderous robber?"

"I was a soldier."

"Do you know the captain of your infamous band?"

"I do not, nor would I betray him if I did."

"Do you hope for mercy?"

"I do not—at your hands."

"Do you hope to escape?"

"Assuredly. Our captain and six others are free. The Wolves will not rest until I am released and the dead avenged."

"Yet we may put you to death on the instant, as you deserve. Captain DeLacy, lead the dog out and shoot him!"

A scornful laugh burst from the wounded Wolf and he cried:

"I defy you. Think not to frighten me by your threats."

"Hold, captain. We will put the fiend to the torture when we bear him to the Bastille. We will——"

"I will never see the inside of the Bastille, Richelieu. Know you that I would be dead ere this were I not assured of a speedy rescue."

"You would kill yourself?"

"Yes. I have a deadly poison about me—and so have we all."

"How can you expect release, villain? Your vile associates will not have the audacity to return here, where they have suffered so signal a defeat."

"Ah, but it was a cunning trick to catch us," rejoined the Wolf, as he glared around at the stuffed dog-skins which had been used as dummies.

And then he glared at the woman, as he hissed forth:

"I knew the she fiend would betray us. Oh, but the captain will have vengeance on her!"

"You are an inveterate fiend yourself!" cried Richelieu, "and you will suffer the torture to the fullest extent!"

Then he turned from the fellow with a look of disgust, as he continued:

"Do any of you recognize the faces of the dead Wolves?"

"That fellow I know," said old Michael, pointing to one of the bodies.

"What was he?"

"He was a woodman in the forest beyond of late. He was once a soldier and was accounted brave."

"I have no doubt. The vile captain has selected good tools. They are all tried soldiers, I warrant."

"Give us work against the foreign foe and we would not turn robbers," grumbled the wounded Wolf. "A poor man must live as well as the great Richelieu."

"Wicked fool! How could I keep France forever at war?"

"Heed him not, your grace," said Frank, "as he is but a vile robber. Would that we had seized the chief."

"You will never seize him, sycophant," said the wounded man.

"Would that I could encounter him again, man to man, dog."

"You would be slain. There is not his equal in France with the sword."

"Peace and close the wretch's mouth," cried Richelieu. "Have you sentinels out?"

"I have, your grace."

"The brute may venture back here again and we are compelled to remain here until we get boats in the morning."

"I would suggest, your grace," said Frank, "that a messenger or two be dispatched to Versailles at once. The others will be safe here until daylight, even should the dogs venture back."

"From the tower above," said the wounded woman, "you can perceive the approach of any boat coming to the island. Then you may be prepared with the firearms."

"That is well," said Richelieu. "Who will volunteer to swim to the left bank and ride to Versailles?"

"I will, your grace," was Frank's prompt reply. "Our horses are secured in yonder grove and it will not take long to reach Versailles."

"And I will guide you through the forest, brave captain," cried old Michael, who had passed through the struggle without receiving the slightest wound.

"Let us away, then, my devoted old friend, and we will soon have assistance and boats for his grace and our wounded friends."

Frank and old Michael made all haste to the river, while a sentinel was sent up to the tower.

Richelieu watched the swimmers as they struck out for the bank and he muttered to himself:

"That is a noble youth. He deserves to win Marie. Fame and fortune await him and I but live to crush the domestic enemies of France."

Richelieu waited until he saw Frank and his old companion emerge from the water, and then he shouted:

"Heaven speed thee, noble youth. Ride with all speed and return with my own surgeon. I will await thee patiently."

"We will return with all speed," cried Frank. "Our horses are fresh. Be on the alert for the Wolves."

And then the two travelers hastened up the grove, where the horses had been left secured.

Frank uttered a joyous exclamation when he beheld the horses resting quietly under the trees.

"We will make good time now, good Michael," he said, as he prepared to mount his own steed. "Think you the Wolves will dare to return to the island again?"

"From what I have heard that rogue of a captain is fit to dare anything."

"That's the truth, if it comes from the lips of a fool," yelled a fierce voice close at hand.

Then out from behind the trees sprang five of the Wolves, firing their pistols at Frank and his companion at the same moment.

A ball struck old Michael on the temple and he fell to the ground without uttering a groan.

Before Frank could draw his weapon the five robbers were on him.

He struggled madly to free himself from their grasp, but as they were all strong, active men, he was soon overpowered and bound.

"Victorious again," cried the captain, as he glared at his prisoner. "Now, my precious young fool, we will place you in a dungeon and then hasten to complete our victory over Richelieu and the other cringing minions."

"Richelieu will defy you, as I now defy you," cried Frank.

"We will see. You will be keeping him company before many hours pass. Is that old rogue dead?"

"He is dead, brave captain."

"Then we will leave him there and away with the horses. On my sacred honor, but Richelieu will grieve ere morning."

Frank was placed on one of the horses and his legs were secured under the animal's stomach, while his hands were bound behind him.

A gag was also placed in his mouth lest he should raise an alarm.

Then the Wolfish party rode away, taking the downward path near the riverbank.

The were scarcely out of hearing when old Michael arose, wiped some drops of blood from his face and muttered:

"So you fancied the old rogue was dead, you villains! On my word of honor, but he is alive—and he will live to see you all slain. Now to swim back and——" The old man paused for a moment and rubbed his head in a thoughtful manner ere he continued his meditations: "Oh, no; I will away to seek aid. I do not fear. What an idiot I am! I have my weapons yet; I will track the Wolves to their next lair, and I will rescue the noble young captain. They must have heard the shots of the island and that should be warning enough. My head is a little confused now, but my legs are in good condition."

And the brave old fellow, all dripping as he was, dashed into the wood in pursuit of the Wolves.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE PERILS AND STRUGGLES OF OUR YOUNG HERO WITH THE WOLVES.

Frank DeLacy was again a prisoner in the hands of the Wolves, who led him along through the forest as fast as the horses could travel.

As the young man was hurried along several sighs escaped him, for he was deploring the death of the faithful old Michael, as well as the failure of their mission.

From the fact that he was not at once slain by his captors, he judged that they were sparing his life for a certain purpose, and he argued that he was to be used in some way against his friends on the island.

The captain of the Wolves was in high glee over the capture of their daring young foe, and he cast a look of triumph on the prisoner as they hastened along.

And on after the Wolves and their prisoner trudged the sturdy old Michael, making good speed over the snow.

When they had traveled about two miles the Wolves pulled up at an old building near the riverside and Frank was dragged therein.

Then the gag was removed from his mouth and the captain addressed him, saying:

"I presume you are surprised that we did not slay you on the instant, minion?"

"Not at all. I know that you have an object to serve in sparing me."

"Can you imagine that object?"

"I believe it is some infernal deviltry against my friends on the island."

"You are correct. Richelieu and the others will be in my power before the day dawns and you must aid me in their capture."

"I must, indeed! You speak as if I were your slave."

"You are my slave. You must do my bidding or you will die."

Now, while Frank was an impetuous dare devil in his way, he had learned that it would be just as well to use a little policy in dealing with his murderous foes.

Could he but learn their plans or identify the leader, and then escape, it would be a grand point gained.

"What do you wish me to do?" he asked, with the air of one who was weary of the prolonged struggle.

"You are considered a man of honor and you will not break your word," answered the captain.

"I will not break my word."

"And you will not lie, even to save your own life?"

"I will not."

"Understand me well, then. You are the only living being outside the island who is now aware of its secrets. We have

yet some hours before daybreak to operate against our foes there. If you will aid us against the tyrant Richelieu, I swear to you that the fair Marie will be your bride?"

"What must I do?"

"You must go with us and assist in capturing Richelieu and the others."

"What! Play the traitor?"

"Your life is in our hands and Richelieu is a base tyrant. Consider that you will die if you refuse. If you accept, a fair bride, wealth and honors await you. You are but a soldier of fortune at best."

"And you are a base villain to make such a proposition to me," cried Frank in indignant tones.

"Bah! We are all playing for our own ends. You serve the tyrant and I serve a great master."

"Who is that?"

"Myself. When Richelieu is no more I will be the greater man."

"What of the king?"

"The king is but a child—an imbecile at best. I will be greater than the king and I will rule France. Will you swear to do my bidding and you will be honored and enriched?"

"I reject your offer with scorn and firm defiance. Welcome a thousand deaths before one hour of dishonor! Do your worst, you infernal villain!"

The captain of the Wolves burst out into fierce laughter before he replied to this defiance, crying:

"You do not know what your doom will be, you dog! Now hear me."

"Speak on, you diabolical wretch, but dream not that you will terrify me!"

"We will see. In the first place, I will have your arms hacked from your body, so that you can never draw a sword again."

"You are a base butcher!"

"I will have your tongue torn from your mouth and your eyes from their sockets, so that you cannot speak to denounce us, or see to point us out. Then I will announce to you who I am. If you survive the maiming, I will send you out on the world, where you will be an object of terror and pity. Will you still refuse to join us?"

"I will, wretch! You may proceed with your torture. I will be avenged as sure as heaven smiles above us!"

"Remember that you will be powerless to speak, see or write."

"I will suffer any torture or degradation before I turn traitor."

"We will put you to the test, then. Out, Wolves, and witness the dog's punishment."

Four of the band and the captain were in the apartment at the time and the command was hardly uttered when others issued forth from another room.

Frank stared at the full band in astonishment, wondering how the recruits were enlisted on such short notice, as several of the original band, it will be remembered, were slain on the island.

The captain noticed Frank's look of surprise and a mocking laugh burst from him, as he cried:

"The Wolves are in full force again, you perceive. Get the ax and the block ready, Wolves, and we will soon deal with this creature of Richelieu."

A large block, such as is used by butchers, was dragged into the centre of the apartment, while another of the band produced a large ax.

"Bind one arm—the left," cried the captain; "and we will see how he will stand the first operation. Have bandages ready to stay the blood. Thirteen, you are the executioner."

Frank witnessed the preparations with a beating heart, knowing full well that his enemies were capable of committing the most terrible atrocities.

It was fearful to think of being disabled in the terrible manner proposed, while in the full bloom of youth and health.

Could he not make one desperate effort against the wretches?

Would it not be better to struggle to the death than to suffer living tortures?

Such were Frank's thoughts and he was not slow in putting them into force.

At the moment when his left arm was released, he sprang back suddenly, hurling aside the two Wolves who held him, and then, with a yell of defiance, he dashed at the villain who held the ax and flung him to the ground.

The brave fellow's movements were so sudden and unexpected—while the strength and activity displayed by him surpassed all belief—that the Wolves were completely bewildered for the moment.

Before they could recover from their surprise the sharp ax was in our hero's hands and both arms were free.

One sweep of that murderous weapon and two of the Wolves were cut down.

"At him, Wolves!" yelled the captain, as he drew his sword and sprang at the brave young man.

"In on them, Hounds!" yelled a voice at the window, as a skin-covered form, with a flashing sword, dashed into the room.

With one stroke of his weapon the newcomer sent another Wolf to the floor, and he was soon beside Frank, who was battling furiously with his foes.

"Come on, come on!" yelled old Michael, striking right and left and as if addressing friends outside. "Hounds to the rescue! Death to the murderous Wolves!"

"Death to the Wolves!" yelled Frank, striking down another of his foes.

"Gain the door," said old Michael, in a whisper, as he gained Frank's side, striking away at the same time.

The two friends sprang backward on the instant, in order to reach the door leading out into the yard.

When old Michael first sprang in, yelling as if he had a good force at his back, the Wolves appeared to be somewhat dismayed.

The wily leader soon perceived, however, that the cry was only a ruse on the part of the newcomer and he pressed on Frank with his sword as he cried:

"On them and cut them down, my valiant Wolves! There are but the two. Let them not escape on your lives!"

Five of the Wolves had already fallen before the ax and old Michael's sword, but the eight others pressed on in a furious manner, giving vent to fierce threats of vengeance in the meanwhile.

The two friends had gained the door without receiving a single wound, and old Michael was quick enough to slam it in the face of the Wolves before springing out into the yard with Frank.

"This way, my noble young friend," he cried, making a dash toward the wood. "We'll yet escape the fiends."

"You are my preserver again," cried Frank, pressing on with the old man.

"We are not safe yet. Here they come, the infernal fiends. Put forth your utmost speed now."

"Can you keep up with me, my dear old Michael, if I fly at my utmost speed?"

"I'll try. But it does not matter so much about me. I am old and you are in the prime of youth. Mercy, how fleet the beasts are. They are gaining on us. Use your utmost speed and do not heed me."

"I will not leave you. We will fight and die together," cried Frank, as he seized the old man's hand and endeavored to drag him along.

"That is madness. Think of the great Richelieu and of the young lady. What does my life matter? Press on with all your speed and I'll follow as fast as I can."

"Never! We'll escape together or we'll stand and give them battle again. Would that I had a sword."

"Take mine, as I can wield the ax with greater ease. But you must fly, I say. On, on and avenge me hereafter. Ha, the beasts press closer and closer."

The fugitives were now on the forest path trudging through the deep snow, and the eight active Wolves were dashing along some ten yards behind them.

Frank was dragging Michael along as well as he could, but the fiends behind were gaining on them at every step.

"Do not slay the dogs," yelled the captain, who was now in advance of the others. "Let us maim them and take them prisoners. We will not give them an easy death."

"Some more of you fiends will bite the earth first," yelled back Frank, as he waved the sword in defiance. "Push on, my dear old friend. Ha, they are closing on us. Take your stand against this tree. Now, fight to the death!"

"To the death!" yelled old Michael, in a voice that rang out through the deep forest. "And death to the Wolves!"

Side by side the two heroes stood while the Wolves rushed at them.

One sweep of old Michael's ax sent one of the band to the ground, while Frank engaged the captain and another of the band.

Our young hero appeared to be possessed with the strength and activity of four brave men, and it was wonderful to behold his movements against his foes.

Parrying one blow after another with lightning-like rapidity, he would then spring to old Michael's assistance and cut down one of the Wolves who was attempting to cut him down from behind.

"Press on the dogs," yelled the leader of the band, in furious tones. "They have disabled three more! Vengeance be our cry!"

"Death to the Wolves!" yelled another voice in the wood. "Charge to the rescue, my brave fellows."

Then was heard the jingling of swords and accoutrements, as well as the trampling of horses in the forest behind them.

"We are beset!" cried the captain of the Wolves. "Retreat—retreat!"

The Wolves darted back on the instant, leaving three of their number lying dead on the snow-covered ground, while one of the fugitives was bleeding fast as he ran.

"After the beasts!" yelled Frank, as a small troop of the guards dashed on them. "I am Captain DeLacy of the Guards, officer. The Wolves are ahead. Dash at them!"

"Charge on the odious Wolves," cried the officer in command. "What a strange costume you wear, brave captain?"

"I will explain about it," cried Frank, as he dashed along with the horsemen. "Come on, my brave old friend, and we will soon crush the murderous beasts."

"I cannot—I am exhausted," groaned old Michael, as he sank at the foot of a tree. "Besides, I am wounded."

"Lift him on a horse. The brave old fellow must not perish," said Frank.

The old man was placed behind one of the horsemen and the party dashed on.

They soon reached the old house by the riverside, only to find it deserted.

The active Wolves had disappeared, taking the horses with them.

Frank and his rescuers found the large barge secured at the riverside and a party of the Guards soon set out for the island under the command of our hero.

Another party remained at the old house to make further search of the premises.

The bodies of the three dead Wolves left in the wood were examined, but they could not be recognized on the following day.

It was certainly proved that they were strangers in the neighborhood.

Richelieu and the two young ladies, together with the wounded woman, were escorted to Versailles at daybreak.

Then Frank received the earnest congratulations of Richelieu and Marie.

But the young man was not satisfied.

The murderous Wolves had received severe chastisement, but they were not finally crushed.

Their daring and indomitable leader was still at large and the mystery of his identity was as deep as ever.

"Will they ever appear again, your grace?" asked Frank, addressing the great statesman on the day after that night of thrilling adventures.

"I fear that they will, my son. The leader of the band is possessed of the spirit and cunning of a fiend. He will not rest while life remains in him."

"Then I will set out again in quest of him," said Frank, in determined tones. "He will find that another can be as persevering for good as he is for evil. I will not rest until he is exposed and punished."

"I commend your resolve, my son, and yet I fear that you will come to your death at the next venture."

"I trust not, your grace. The third venture must succeed. I have your full permission again?"

"You have, most assuredly. Crush the infernal Wolves—and fame and a fair bride await you."

CHAPTER XIV.

FRANK DELACY SETS OUT ON HIS THIRD VENTURE AFTER THE WOLVES.

"The Wolves were out again last night and our good queen was their victim," was the thrilling cry that rang out through the palace of Versailles on the third morning after that night of startling adventures.

Richelieu heard the cry and it pained him to the heart, for he loved that good queen far dearer than he did his life.

Old Michael, who was recovered from his wound, heard the doleful shout, and he grasped his shovel, as he stood in the garden, and muttered:

"There will be some work for you soon, old fellow. The brave young captain will set out again."

Frank DeLacy heard the ominous words and he gnashed his teeth with rage, for he also adored the once very beautiful and still charming queen.

"The dogs of the earth," he muttered, "how will I get at them?"

For three days he had been pondering over his partial discomfiture and endeavoring to form some bold project for the total destruction of the desperate band.

First, as he said to himself, he had set out alone against them, and he had been compelled to retreat—even though he had succeeded in accomplishing the rescue of the lady he loved.

Then he sallied out with twelve chosen companions and his success was not as decisive as he wished.

And now the fierce and relentless Wolves were out again, while their last victim was the first lady in the land.

The queen had retired to rest at the usual hour, having dismissed her maids in attendance.

As she was not accustomed to arise until a late hour on a winter's morning, her maids did not enter her apartment until nine o'clock, and then it was found that she had been mysteriously abducted.

A note was left on the royal pillow, which read as follows:

"TO THE KING OF FRANCE.—In order to display our power, we have resolved on abducting the queen. She will receive courteous treatment at our hands, but she will not be released until a ransom of five thousand golden louis be left at our treasury."

"By order of THE CAPTAIN OF THE WOLVES."

The king was furious; Richelieu was frantic with rage and every officer in the police swore that he would forfeit his life to rescue the queen and be avenged on the foul dastards.

When Richelieu recovered from his first outburst of rage and indignation, he sent for Frank DeLacy, but the young officer was not to be found.

No one had seen him leaving the palace; he had not informed a living soul of his intended movements, and he had not even appeared out of his apartment after he had heard the startling cry throughout the halls of the palace.

In less than half an hour after the alarm cries were raised, numerous bands of horsemen were scouring the roads and the woods in all directions.

Night darkened its shadows again and yet no tidings of the queen were heard, and Frank did not reappear at the palace.

Some asserted that Frank must have been borne away with the queen, and others were mean enough to insinuate that he was in league with the Wolves and had assisted in her capture.

Where was our hero while the excitement prevailed in Versailles, and, indeed, throughout all Paris? for the queen was loved and respected by all the people.

Frank was at work after his own fashion, and he worked alone.

Let us hasten away to the old tavern which was still kept by Pierre, who had also escaped from the Wolves.

It was the hour of eight and many guests had assembled in the main room, while all were discussing the abduction of the queen.

At the hour mentioned an old soldier in a tattered uniform entered the place and called for a cup of cheap wine.

He had a cavalry sword at his side, two large pistols were stuck in his belt, and he had all the appearance of one who could use the weapons well, although his hair and huge beard were as white as the snow outside, while his form was stooped as if with fatigue and many hardships.

"Landlord," said the old soldier, "can you tell me where I can find your old comrade who is known as Michael Talbot?"

"He may be found at the palace."

"At the palace! He is in the ranks again, then, and on guard there?"

"He is assistant gardener in the palace garden, stranger. Whence come you and where did you know old Michael?"

"Where did I know him? Well, it is no matter now. Dear me, how can I travel back to Versailles to-night? I was in hopes that I would find shelter in his cottage."

"You may find shelter here till morning, if you but have the cash."

"I have some cash, but not a great deal. I can pay, however. Another cup of your good wine."

"You have heard the last news, I presume?" said the landlord.

"Yes, indeed. What a bold band those Wolves must be to enter the palace and bear off the good queen!"

"It is a bold band," said the landlord, with a sigh. "That old friend of yours is a great rogue."

"You mean Michael Talbot?"

"I mean Michael Talbot."

"Then you are an infamous liar to make such an assertion and I will make you eat your words."

As the old soldier spoke he sprang up from the bench before the fire and flung the contents of the wine cup in the landlord's face.

Then all was commotion in the tavern, as the old landlord's wife called on her friends to assail the old soldier.

And old Pierre was not slow on the fight himself.

Wiping the wine from his eyes, he sprang to seize a sabre hanging over the fireplace, and he was the first to rush at the stranger, as he cried:

"I'll cut your ears off for that insult, you rascally old knave."

The old soldier had drawn his sabre at the same moment, and he met the onset with a quiet smile, as he replied:

"I'll teach you to call my good old friend a knave, you hungry-looking dog. Take that for your life."

As the old soldier spoke he parried a blow aimed at him by the landlord, and then, with a sudden movement upward, he struck the old host on the elbow.

Pierre dropped the sabre and danced around the room, yelling:

"He's broken my arm. In on the dog of a stranger, friends, and avenge me."

"Half a dozen of you at the time is too much," cried the old veteran. "Come one or two at the time and I will finish you all in the same manner."

"What is all this commotion about?" cried a hoarse voice, as a tall, stout man, wearing a black mask on his face, sprang into the room from an inner apartment.

"That old dog of a soldier has nearly murdered my husband," cried the landlady, as she pointed at the defiant old soldier. "Oh, good monsieur, will you not punish him as he deserves?"

"He is not able nor is there any single man in the house able," cried the old soldier, turning to the masked man.

"You are boastful, old knave."

"I can back my words."

"What brought about the quarrel?" asked the masked man, as he turned to the landlord.

"I called old Michael, the charcoal burner, a false rascal and he flung a cup of wine in my face."

"I call old Michael a base, treacherous knave!" cried the masked man, turning to the old soldier.

"And I fling the cup in your face!" cried the old soldier, suiting the action to the words.

The tall man staggered backward for a moment, and then, with a fearful oath, he drew his sword and sprang at the old soldier, who was prepared to meet him.

"Leave his punishment to me!" cried the masked man, waving the others back. "I'll soon humble him."

"And I'll soon expose you, brute!" thought the old soldier, as the sabre clashed against the sword. "Now to unmask thee, fiend, and then to cut my way out."

The old soldier was no other than Frank DeLacy, and he was facing the captain of the Wolves again.

He did not hope to slay him in presence of half a dozen of his disguised followers, who were at his back, but he did hope to cut away the mask.

CHAPTER XV.

OUR HERO FIGHTS AND RUNS AND THEN PLAYS THE SPY.

"Desperate cases require desperate remedies" is a well-known medical maxim.

The same motto has been adopted by some of the boldest hunters of criminals the world has ever known.

It may be questioned, however, if any detective of modern days ever ran a greater risk than our hero, when he boldly assailed the leader of the ferocious Wolves in the old tavern.

Frank DeLacy felt assured that the old tavern was a sort of rendezvous for the robbers before they assumed their wolfish disguises for night excursions, and when he ventured there

again, alone and in disguise, it was in the full hope of encountering the leader of the band.

And now that he was engaged in an encounter with the masked man, what did he hope to achieve?

Did he seek to slay the wretch and then cut his way through the others or did he merely seek to expose the man at the time and act thereafter for his destruction?

Frank could not answer the question himself at the moment, as he was simply resolved to be guided by events as they might occur.

If he inflicted a serious wound on his opponent without unmasking him, the chances were that he would be compelled to retreat before the others and his object would not be fully accomplished.

He fought, therefore, to cut away the mask rather than to slay the dreaded leader of the Wolves.

Frank used his heavy sabre with the greatest ease, while the captain of the Wolves fought with a long rapier.

Our young hero slashed away with all his might and a casual observer would imagine that he used his weapon with more force than skill.

But his cunning opponent was not of that opinion.

After Frank had skillfully parried the dexterous thrusts of the rapier, he came to the conclusion that the old soldier was an expert in the use of his weapon as well as a furious fighter.

Though naturally cruel and bloodthirsty, the unknown leader did not at first aim to slay his old foe, and he had not the slightest suspicion as to the real character of his adversary.

The leader aimed to wound or disarm his opponent, and then punish him thereafter, or use him in the band, as the humor might move him.

Yet when he found that he could not accomplish an easy victory, his fierce blood became aroused and he set on Frank with more vigor, while he used more caution in his own defence.

"You fence well, old rogue," cried the captain, as Frank parried another furious thrust. "Who instructed you in the modern tricks of the game?"

"The last gallant young captain I served under."

"What was his name?"

"Captain Frank DeLacy."

"Curses on his head," hissed the masked man. "Do you admire him?"

"Most assuredly. He is a brave soldier and a good man. I would die to do him a service."

"Then you will die without rendering him a service. I hate him and all his friends. So you must die."

"You will not slay me, boaster. Ah, there goes your plumed hat. Now to cut away that black mask, that I may look at the face of my foe."

When the Wolf found that his hat was cut away he gave vent to a fierce growl and then renewed the combat with greater fury, as he cried:

"Old dog, I will now have your life."

"I will see your villainous face first," cried Frank, as he made a slash at the mask and came within a hair's breadth of cutting it away.

Expressions of rage were heard on all sides, and some of the men grasped their weapons with a tighter grip, as they saw that the masked man's life was in imminent peril from the swift-flashing sabre in the old soldier's hand.

"In on the old churl!" yelled the landlord, who was smarting under the insult offered him.

"Yes, let us cut the old dog to pieces," yelled one of the visitors.

"Hold, there," cried the captain of the Wolves, in furious tones. "Interfere not with my victim on your lives. I will soon have him at my mercy."

And then, putting forth his utmost skill and strength, he attacked Frank with still greater impetuosity.

But our hero met him with a ready hand and a wrist of steel.

Thrust after thrust was turned aside with apparent ease, the heavy sabre playing as lightly as the thin rapier, while the dreaded captain was compelled to spring back more than once in order to avoid the flashing cuts made at his mask.

It was a splendid display on both sides, but the contest could not last at the furious pace.

The captain of the Wolves was at length forced against the wall, at the back of the room, and before he could extricate himself from the awkward position the point of Frank's sabre reached the black mask and cut it away.

Another whirling blow of the weapon and the vile leader was disarmed.

Then a cry of surprise escaped from Frank as he stared at his disarmed opponent.

"Mercy on me," he cried, "the man is a Blackamoor or a devil. His face is as black as his heart."

"I'll have your life, dog!" yelled the man with the black face.

"In on him, my friends, and show him no mercy!"

Frank sprang at the black leader with his sabre and struck him a fierce blow on the side of his head as he yelled:

"Blackamoor or devil, I'll have your vile life!"

The black leader fell on the ground with a groan and Frank turned with his flashing sabre to encounter six stalwart opponents at least, while the landlord yelled:

"Down with the old dog! He's a treacherous spy."

"Slay him, slay him!" cried the wounded leader, as he raised his bleeding head from the floor.

Springing back toward a door in the rear and facing his on-rushing foes at the same time, Frank drew one of his pistols and fired.

A groan burst from one of his assailants, as the man fell on the floor with a bullet in his breast.

Standing in the doorway for a moment and keeping his foes at bay with the flashing sabre, the brave young fellow drew his other pistol and fired again.

Another of his assailants fell on the instant and another groan rang out.

Then a vengeful shout arose from the others and high above that shout rang out the Wolfish leader's voice as he cried:

"Press on him, cowards. He must die a dog's death."

"Some of you dash outside and take him in the rear," yelled the landlord, as he kept at a safe distance from the gleaming sabre.

That hint was enough for Frank and he felt that it was time to beat a hasty retreat.

Springing back suddenly he slammed the door in his assailants' faces and the next moment he was out in the back yard.

One glance around showed a splendid black horse, which was secured by the bridle to a ring in the back wall of the tavern.

It was but the work of a moment to unloose the horse and spring on his back.

Yet he had not a moment to spare, as his assailants were out on him before he could face the horse out of the yard and they were yelling vengeful cries as they made a combined rush at him.

The flashing sabre was brought into play again and Frank sent forth a shout of defiance as he faced the black steed toward a low wall at the back of the tavern yard.

The good horse reared and kicked at first, thereby helping to scatter the rider's assailants, and then, having received a blow of the sabre, he dashed at the wall and cleared it in splendid style.

"Mount and pursue him!" yelled the leader from the window of the tavern. "A hundred gold louis to the man who slays the infernal old dog."

Then there was a rush for the stable, while Frank was dashing across a field toward a well-known wood.

"That infernal fiend has the cunning of the arch-fiend himself," he muttered, "but he has not seen the last of me to-night. To think that he should blacken his face so as to disguise his features, even behind the mask. Yet will I see that face to-night if I have to risk my life over and over again."

When Frank reached the wood his late assailants were dashing over the stone wall in pursuit.

"This must be the captain's horse," muttered our hero, as he fondled the splendid animal bounding forward at a rapid pace, "and now I will lead them on a false scent. Thank fortune, I am now familiar with the woods around here."

The daring fellow was soon out on the highway and the pursuers were thundering after him on fleet horses.

Frank rode direct for Marseilles at first, but he did not proceed very far, when, at a turn of the road, he sprang his horse from the main road and gained the shelter of the wood.

Then he turned toward the tavern again.

Scarcely half an hour had elapsed after he had left the tavern when Frank was stealing back there again on foot, having secured the black steed to a tree in the wood.

The daring fellow had reloaded his pistols, the sabre was by his side and he was therefore prepared for more desperate work.

Yet it was not his object to make an open display of himself in this venture.

He was venturing a little in the manner of a spy and his object was to gain the house unperceived and make his observations through the windows.

As he drew near the house he perceived a light burning in one of the upper windows and he could perceive shadows passing back and forth in the apartment.

"The wounded fiend is up there," muttered Frank, "and I must climb up and get a look at him. Assuredly they must have washed the black stuff from his face while dressing the wound. Now I will know him at last."

To gain the outside of the window was an easy task for our active hero.

Behold him then clinging to the sill and with one foot resting on a hook in the wall, as he peered into the sleeping room.

A man fully dressed was sitting on the bed with a white bandage around his head, while his face was as black as that of a negro.

"The villain retains his disguise," muttered Frank, in disgust. "He even fears to be recognized by those who wait on him."

But who were the man's attendants?

Frank had no difficulty in recognizing the landlord's old wife, who was bustling around the room in a nervous manner.

Then the young man's eyes were turned on another female figure whose face was disguised by a dark mask.

The masked stranger was evidently a lady of rank, as her costume was made up of the richest materials, and two diamond rings were sparkling on her shapely hands.

Frank could perceive that she moved around with grace and dignity; that she spoke to the wounded man in sweet, caressing tones and that she waited on him with all the gentleness of a dear wife or a sister.

"I have seen that beautiful form before," muttered Frank, who was becoming more and more interested in the scene. "Oh, would that she would remove the mask! Can it be that she is the woman of the island?"

Then he remembered that the unfortunate woman of the island was still an invalid at Versailles and that she hated and feared the captain of the robbers.

Presently the old landlady left the room, closing the door after her.

Then the strange lady took a seat by the side of the wounded man and clasped one of his hands, as she inquired in trembling tones:

"Do you feel that you are seriously wounded, my dear friend?"

"It will be nothing. I will be up and about again in a few days. Curses on that old dog of a soldier!"

"Think you not that he may be a spy of Richelieu's, my dear friend?"

"It cannot be; that minion DeLacy is the only one who would have the courage or the cunning to attempt such a venture, and he it is not."

"Do you know, my dear friend," continued the masked lady, "that I think it would be best for you to retire for the present and let the Wolves?"

"Retire, indeed! I will leave the field to Richelieu. I will let the brave Wolves who have poured terror into the hearts of Richelieu and his minions. Never! The Wolves will not be driven out until I am master of France."

"But you run such fearful risks that I tremble for your safety. Witness this gash on your head to-night."

"A pure accident. Curses on that old dog of a soldier. Who would imagine that he would oppose me as he did?"

"There is something mysterious about that soldier," persisted the lady. "I still believe that he is one of Richelieu's cunning spies."

CHAPTER XVI.

MORE STIRRING ADVENTURES FOR OUR HERO.

Frank DeLacy was actually petrified when he recognized the queen.

She had removed her mask.

To think of that good woman being in the company of the terrible captain of the Wolves and waiting on him as if she were thoroughly devoted to him!

What could it mean?

It was most evident that the queen was a willing prisoner; that she was acquainted with all the secrets of the desperate leader, and that their bond of union was a common hatred of Richelieu.

Our young hero had hitherto admired and respected his sovereign, but what was he to think of her thereafter?

What was he to do?

Must he expose the queen, who was a universal favorite?

The exclamation which had burst from Frank's lips on recognizing the queen was overheard by those inside.

The lady placed the mask over her face on the instant, while the leader of the secret band cried:

"An eavesdropper is at the door. Hand me my sword."

Springing to the door as he seized his sword, the leader continued:

"They have retired. Ha—you infernal old dog! A spy, a spy! Treachery is at work in earnest."

The wounded man had caught a glimpse of Frank's face at the window and he immediately sprang at him, sent the point of the weapon through the glass and touched our hero on the forehead.

At the same moment the landlord and two men rushed out from the back door and sprang toward him, while the former yelled:

"'Tis that old dog of a soldier back here again. He is a spy. Kill him, kill him on the instant."

Frank was on his feet and his sword drawn before either of the three men could reach him.

"Seize him, seize him!" yelled the wounded man from the window above. "Do not slay the old dog at present."

"Come on, you murderous villain?" cried Frank, drawing a pistol with one hand, while he brandished his sword with the other.

Then, as if inspired with hatred for the man in the window above, he pointed the pistol at him and fired.

The leader of the Wolves saw the movement and sprang aside, just as the ball struck the window frame above where his head had been a moment before.

Wounded and all as he was, the undaunted leader of the Wolves sprang out of the room and dashed down the stairs.

Frank was then engaged in a fierce struggle with the men below and he was backing toward the low stone wall at the same time.

Then arose a clatter of hoofs and into the yard rode the party of horsemen who had started out in pursuit of our hero.

Before he could spring over the wall he was surrounded on all sides by his foes and the leader of the Wolves was standing at the door of the tavern crying:

"Take the old dog prisoner. I must see what he knows."

Frank fought with all the fury of desperation, but his foes were too numerous for him, pressing on as they did with the ferocity of wild beasts.

He was soon borne to the ground, his sword and pistols were dragged from him and his arms secured.

"Light the lamps below and down into the cellar with him," yelled the leader of the Wolves. "We'll soon learn what he is."

The disguised man was dragged down into the cellar, where he soon found himself surrounded by thirteen masked figures.

"Now, old dog," commenced the wounded leader, "you will die the death. Who sent you here to spy on us?"

Frank realized that he was not yet recognized and he determined to braver it out as well as possible.

Maintaining the gruff voice he had assumed throughout the earlier scenes, he replied:

"I am not a spy. I came here in search of an old friend."

"Why were you up spying at that window?"

"I was curious to see your face with the black stuff off."

"Did you recognize the lady who was up there with me?"

"Most assuredly."

The captain of the Wolves started at this blunt reply, and he regarded the prisoner for some moments with intense ferocity, ere he continued:

"Do you not know that the reply seals your doom?"

"What care I? A soldier can die but once, and I have not much to live for. I am old and——"

"You are an old hypocrite. I am convinced that you have been sent here as a spy. Have you heard of the Wolves?"

"Who has not heard of that band of cut-throats?"

"Do you know that you have fallen into their hands?"

"I suspect as much."

"If we spare your life, will you confess that you are a spy and tell us who sent you here? If you hesitate thirteen swords will soon pierce your body."

Our disguised hero hesitated to reply and he glanced at the thirteen gleaming weapons as if in terror.

"If you have heard of the Wolves," continued the leader, "you must feel that we do not threaten in vain. Confess all and your life will be spared."

"How am I to be assured of that?"

"You will have my word, old dog."

"The word of a murderous robber, forsooth," cried the old man, meaningly.

"It will be sacred, wretch. Still you must go further."

"What must I do?"

"You must take an oath—a fearful oath—to be true to this noble band."

"Bah! I would not join you if I had to suffer tortures."

"Slay the old dog, Wolves," yelled the leader, in furious tones.

"Hold, hold, I pray you!" cried a female voice.

And into the cellar walked the masked queen, holding her hands aloft in a beseeching manner.

"This is not a place for you, lady," cried the leader.

"I crave you that you will not slay this old man," pleaded the queen.

"We must slay him. He has even recognized you. He will betray us all if we set him free."

"He will pledge me his honor as a soldier that he will not betray us," the queen continued to plead, turning her masked face on the prisoner.

"He would break his oath. I am assured that he is a spy."

"Oh, why must you spill more blood? It was not the original——"

"Hush, lady. Remember that you are exposing our secrets."

"Would that we had never had secrets and that we could all bury the past," sighed the queen. "But you must not slay this brave old soldier. Are you a spy?"

"I am," was Frank's prompt reply. "I cannot lie to a lady."

"Who sent here?"

"Captain Frank DeLacy."

"Hear you that, lady? Now will you crave that his life be spared. Retire until we put the old dog to death."

"He must not die," persisted the queen, in decided tones.

"He is brave and honest and he is worthy of respect. It would be a foul crime to slay him."

"But he will have us all slain."

"Old soldier," asked the queen, "do you know this gentleman?"

"On my honor as a soldier, I have not recognized him, for which he may thank his blackened face."

"If I prevail on these present to spare your life will you swear to remain silent as to what you have witnessed to-night, and also that you will never take action against this band?"

"I cannot take such an oath, lady."

"You perceive that the old wretch will be our enemy throughout. He must suffer death. Please retire, lady, and let our sentence take effect."

As the leader of the Wolves spoke he approached the queen and endeavored to use gentle force in getting her to retire from the cellar.

"Unhand me!" cried the queen, in commanding tones. "I will speak alone with the prisoner and you must all retire."

"It is folly, dear lady, and——"

"I will be obeyed! Retire, all of you, and leave me alone with the prisoner."

At a signal from the leader the twelve masked men retired from the cellar.

"Were it not well that I remained?" asked the leader.

"No! We will be alone. I alone can treat with this man."

The queen followed the wounded man to the door and secured it after him.

Then she turned the disguised Frank to follow her to the further end of the cellar.

The young man obeyed, very much amazed at the action of the queen.

Speaking in cautious tones, she startled him still more by saying:

"I know you, Captain DeLacy."

"You amaze me, lady. I am stupefied at the discovery I've made."

"You are shocked at beholding me in league with these men."

"I must confess it, lady."

"Know you not that kings and queens are compelled to use certain instruments for defense and protection?"

"It is not for me to upbraid you, respected lady, yet——"

"Oh, I know what you would say. Richelieu, who is my mortal enemy, does not scruple in using assassins and dungeons to do his vile work. I abhor bloodshed and violence, yet was I compelled to defend myself against my enemies."

"I only deplore that you should use such murderous wretches to——"

"No more on that point. Do you wish to save your life?"

"Most assuredly, lady."

"Then you must become one of the band and serve me against Richelieu."

"That is impossible. I have already sworn to hunt the band to destruction."

"Then you must die. It is impossible for me to save you."

"I cannot break my oath, even if I were so inclined. Had I not sworn at all, I would prefer death to joining such a murderous set of wretches. Oh, respected lady, if you value your own good name——"

"Silence! You know not what you are speaking of. My good name is not at stake. Richelieu must be crushed, and I will use every means against him. Accept my proposition or suffer death."

"I will suffer death."

"Then your doom is sealed. Yet stay. Will you swear to keep silent, and——"

"Lady, I will not make any pledge that may hinder me from striving to crush the murderous band."

"Then you will be silenced."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE THRILLING ADVENTURES OF OUR HERO DURING THE NIGHT.

There was not a woman in the world more respected by Frank DeLacy than the Queen of France.

Although past the bloom of life at the time, she was still a very beautiful woman, while her manners were charming, her voice was rich and pure, and she bore an excellent reputation as a wife and mother.

Great was the young man's surprise, then, to find that this accomplished woman was not only connected with the wicked Wolves, but that she had condemned him to death.

"Then you must be silenced," was the emphatic sentence on Frank as he turned away in the cellar of the tavern as if to leave him to his fate.

"Will you grant me one request?" he asked, calling after the queen and speaking in sad tones.

"What is your request?"

"Let Richelieu know that I died in his service."

"Curse Richelieu! Were it not for that arrogant minister you would not be here and neither would I. He has been the bane of my wedded life."

"I can only say, gracious queen, that he has been a fearless supporter of France against foreign enemies. Then it is declared that I must die?"

"Yes, you must die, unless you become one of the Wolves. If you were my own son I could not save you otherwise."

And the queen moved toward the door again, at the same time signaling for the entrance of the Wolves.

"Will he take the oath?" asked the hoarse-voiced leader.

"He will not."

"Then 'twere well to put him to death at once. We have other work on hand to-night, you know."

"Were it not well to postpone the other business to-night?" suggested the queen.

"For what reason?"

"You are wounded."

"Bah! 'Twas but a trivial blow I received. Retire, madam, and we will soon settle with this minion."

The queen moved towards the door and she turned to Frank again and bent a pitying glance on him as she said:

"Oh, why will you not save your life? You have so much to live for."

"I could not live dishonored, gracious lady, and I prefer death. Believe me that I will be avenged."

"Tush!" cried the grim leader of the band. "Away with you, madam. That hound is not to be conciliated."

The queen retired and Frank was left alone with the dreaded Wolves.

The cellar door was scarcely closed when the queen appeared again, and, addressing the grim leader, said:

"I pray you, for my sake, that you will give him an easy death."

A mocking laugh burst from the fiend and he cried:

"Most assuredly. He has killed so many of our valiant band that we must be merciful. Please retire, madam, and be assured that he will not suffer more than is necessary."

The door was scarcely closed on the queen for the last time than the vile leader cried:

"Secure the prisoner to the post and then we will vote on the mode of his death."

And in that dread moment did our hero give up all hope?

No, for life never dies in the breast of the brave man until life is crushed out of it.

Yet what was he to do?

His hands were secured behind him and numerous strong and vengeful foes were thirsting for his blood.

"Is there no aid near?" he asked himself, as he thought of his numerous friends and the girl he loved.

While he was asking himself the question the Wolves were consulting.

Then, as if in response in the negative, the leader of the wolves cried:

"My motion meets with full approval. We will all draw his blood. Draw your swords and place them against his breast."

Frank was then secured to a post in the middle of the cellar and with his face to the door.

A moment after and twelve swords were pointed at his breast, while the leader held his weapon to the victim's throat.

"When I give the word you will all plunge your weapons into the spy," cried the fiendish captain.

"You do not quail," cried the captain, as he watched the fearless countenance of the young man.

"Not in the face of cowards. I will soon be avenged."

Giving vent to a fearful oath, the vile leader was about to give the fatal order, when the door was flung open again and the queen appeared, crying:

"Hold your weapons!"

"Why this interruption?" demanded the captain, in angry tones.

"I have changed my mind. The noble young man must not die."

"Must not? Are you mad, madam? He is our greatest enemy."

"I care not, he must be spared."

"But we care. He must not be set at liberty to betray you—to betray us all."

"I say he must, and I believe I am mistress here. He will not betray me and he cannot betray any of you, for he knows you not. Release him and let him depart in peace, I command."

"Without any pledges?"

"I need none from him. I am assured he will never betray me."

"I would die first," cried Frank, as he bent an assuring glance at the queen.

Deep and bitter were the curses muttered by the vile captain, as he signaled to the others to release Frank.

The queen watched the Wolves and the prisoner until the latter was released.

Pointing to the door, she then said:

"Go your way now, DeLacy. War with the Wolves as you will, but you will never denounce me to Richelieu?"

"I will war with the Wolves to the death, good queen, but death will come to me ere I mention your name in connection with them. A thousand thanks for——"

"No more. Away with you."

Frank was soon out on the road and he did not proceed far before he turned into the wood to secure the black horse.

"I will not rest an hour until I have crushed the beasts," he muttered, feeling more embittered than ever. "I will be doing the queen a service thereby, as she is in their power."

He was soon riding back to Versailles at full speed.

Without waiting to consult Richelieu, Frank summoned eleven of his chosen companions-in-arms and requested them to arm and mount horse with all speed.

Old Michael was summoned at the same time.

Among those selected was the keeper of the royal hounds, who had charge of two splendid bloodhounds.

These dogs were to accompany the expedition in order to track down the Wolves.

Making all speed possible, Frank was soon leading his chosen band back toward the old tavern.

Before they had proceeded very far a bright light appeared in the woods ahead of them.

"That's a house on fire," said old Michael, who was riding near Frank.

"'Tis the old tavern! The fiends have set it on fire, so as to hide all traces of their deviltry there. Ride fast, ride fast, and we'll soon be on their track!"

As Frank spoke he urged on the good black horse and the others pressed on with him, while the two fierce hounds sprang on beside the keeper.

The old tavern was enveloped in flames when they rode along in front of it, but no human being appeared in sight.

"Put the hounds on the scent," cried Frank to the keeper.

The hounds were set loose and they immediately dashed along the road leading out into the country, uttering fierce cries as they ran along.

"Press on close after them," cried Frank, his heart beating with joy at the hope of encountering his fell enemies for the last time.

"The scent is warm," cried old Michael, as he watched the dogs. "They are not far ahead of us."

Frank DeLacy had not given a word of explanation to his companions as to his night's adventures, merely stating that he hoped to get on the track of the Wolves when they reached the old tavern.

The dogs ran along in full cry for more than two miles and they then turned into a well trodden path in the wood.

"Where does this path lead to?" asked Frank of old Michael.

"To the old ruined chateau."

"To whom does the chateau belong?"

"To the king. It was formerly used as a hunting lodge."

"Is it inhabited at present?"

"Not that I am aware of. It bears an evil reputation."

"The very place where the villains would seek a refuge or a rendezvous. Can you call back the dogs, keeper?"

"Impossible, when they are on the warm scent, captain."

"Then we must push on with all speed. Look to your arms, friends, and beware of an ambush in the woods beyond."

The riders were close behind the dogs and the animals were "giving tongue" in a still louder strain.

"They have stopped at the iron gate beyond," said old Michael. "You see there's a very high wall around the grounds of the chateau."

"We will dismount here and approach on foot," remarked Frank, as they pulled up at the gate. "Keeper, silence the dogs."

The keeper addressed the dogs in soothing tones and flung them some pieces of raw meat at the same time.

Having secured their horses to the tree near the gate, our hero led his band up the avenue leading to the old building.

"There's no light appearing," said Frank.

"They have heard the dogs, perchance," said old Michael.

"I would advise that we get behind the trees here, while one or more go up to reconnoitre."

"A wise suggestion, Michael. You and I will steal up. Louis Real, you will hasten up with the others should you hear Michael sending forth the cry of an owl."

Having thus arranged with his friend, Frank and old Michael stole through the wild shrubbery, crouching low as they stole along.

The stillness of death was over the old chateau as they drew near it and they could not discern the least glimmering of a light.

"They must have slipped away by a path in the rear, Michael," said Frank, when they had gained the court yard; "you can perceive, by the fresh hoof marks, that the hounds were correct."

"They are in there still," said Michael, drawing Frank back into the shrubbery.

"Why do you say so?"

"Look at the chimney. See you not the smoke issuing therefrom?"

"Very true. But they may have kindled the fire and then left in haste."

"They are in there still," persisted old Michael. "They heard the baying of the dogs and they remain quiet. We must enter if we would find them."

"Then we will enter. Give the signal to the others."

Michael sent forth the signal and the others approached.

"Now, friends," said Frank, "we must enter the house. Be prepared for hard blows or some cunning treachery. I will lead the way to the door. If we can not open it we will burst it

in. Secure the dogs to the tree, keeper. Have your ax ready, Michael."

The young leader advanced to the door in a bold manner and struck thereon with the hilt of his sword.

A few moments after the window above him was raised and a female voice demanded:

"What do you seek here, stranger?"

"We seek the Wolves."

"The Wolves? The wolves are in the forest and not——"

"Burst in the door," interrupted Frank, as he recognized the voice above, "if it is not immediately opened. Madam, I demand that you give us admittance."

Half a dozen blows of the ax were dealt by Michael and the door was forced in with a loud bang.

"Light the torches!" cried Frank, as he sprang into the hallway, sword in hand. "We'll unearth the fiends."

Four torches were soon flaming up and Frank seized one of them, crying:

"Keep close together, friends, and beware of treachery."

"There's no treachery intended here," cried a veiled woman, as she appeared before him on the stairway. "You are at liberty to search the house from bottom to top."

The veiled lady was no other than the queen and she disguised her voice in an admirable manner.

Yet Frank recognized her.

"We are compelled to search the house, madam," he said; "but rest assured that we will not offend you."

"I do not fear you, monsieur. Proceed, as I cannot resist."

Frank was in a quandary.

He had strong suspicions that the Wolves were hiding somewhere in the old building and that they would assail him foully at a favorable opportunity.

"On the other hand," he asked himself, "may they not have retreated from hence and will we not be wasting valuable time in searching the house?"

While thus reflecting he heard the bloodhounds outside sending forth fierce growls and he cried:

"Keeper, hasten out with two others and see to the hounds. Bring them in here."

The keeper obeyed the order and Frank kept regarding the queen, who stood on the stairs, as he said:

"Will you pledge me your sacred word of honor, madam, that the Wolves are not secreted in the building?"

"I will make no further confession. You are at liberty to search."

"Treachery! Treachery!" cried the keeper of the hounds. "The dogs have been slain!"

"Then the Wolves are about!" cried Frank, in excited tones. "Forward, my brave followers, till we unearth the fiends!"

"Yes, the Wolves are about!" rang out a hoarse voice, that appeared to ascend from below. "Search for them and you will all encounter death."

"Get into the cellar," cried Frank. "Look to your arms!"

Frank led the way into the cellar and they soon gained a large apartment out of which no other exit could be observed.

"Look for a secret door, friends," cried Frank, as he struck on the wall with his sword.

"Look to the door by which you have entered," cried the hoarse voice again, "and you will do better. Fools, you are all trapped. You are doomed!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

AN EXPLOSION, ANOTHER HUNT AND THEN FOR A SINGULAR DUEL.

Frank was not dismayed at the turn of affairs, but he did upbraid himself for allowing the treacherous Wolves to entrap them all in such a simple manner.

Old Michael was the first to recover from the surprise and he looked at the iron door for a moment, ere he burst out into a laugh and cried:

"They are the fools to think of entrapping us in such a weak net."

"Hasten, Michael!" cried the keeper of the hounds, who was also an old soldier. "Ah, I perceive your plan."

"It is very simple," said Michael. "I will blow the door down with powder. Hand me all you can spare, each of you."

The powder was furnished in short order and Michael made all haste in his arrangements for the explosion.

Having completed the mine, he said:

"Draw back to the end of the apartment while I lay the train. There will be an infernal smoke thereafter. Hold your noses until you get out into the air."

The train was laid and the torch was applied thereto.

Then followed an explosion that fairly shook the old building to its foundation, after which an infernal smoke swept against the members of the band.

"Hurrah!" cried the old veteran. "That shows that the air is coming in. Now, let us all out."

"Look to your weapons!" cried Frank, as he dashed through the smoke. "The fiends may be lying in wait for us."

The door was burst open and they all rushed up into the hall without encountering a single foe.

"Sally out!" cried Frank, "and let us to the stables. We will then know if they have ridden away."

"They are away!" cried old Michael. "See, the fresh tracks lead back here toward that wood. Oh, if we only had the dogs now we——"

"Cease repining for the dogs," cried Frank, "as I see the stables are empty. We are baffled again, but we will not despair. Four of you hasten down and bring up the horses and I only hope they are safe."

Fortunately, the horses had not been disturbed by the Wolves and it was evident that they had hastened away by the path at the back of the building the moment the others were entrapped.

"I can see it all," thought Frank. "The queen would not allow them to risk another encounter with us."

Then, speaking aloud, he cried:

"Michael, I will intrust you to guide us in the pursuit. Mount and away, my brave friends. The chase is not over yet."

"It is an easy matter to follow these footmarks before me," said old Michael, looking down at the ground. "But they outnumber us by six at least."

"That does not matter. There are some women among them besides."

"Hold there a moment," cried a female voice from one of the windows.

It was the queen who spoke.

"What would you, madam?" asked Frank, impatiently. "We will not be retarded in our pursuit."

"If you will take my earnest advice you will give up the pursuit. I may not be present to save you again."

"Did you save us?"

"As certain as that I breathe, you would have been all sacrificed in the cellar were it not for my intercession."

"We thank you, madam."

"But you will not obey me?"

"We cannot. We are pledged to pursue the murderous Wolves to the death."

"To your own death will you ride, then, as you will be ambushed as sure as the sky is over you."

"We must risk it. Farewell, good madam. Speed on, my friends."

"Do you know that lady, Frank?" asked Louis Real, as they rode on together.

"I think I do, yet I cannot tell you, my dear friend, but I feel certain this night will decide our struggle with the villainous Wolves."

"I trust so," said Louis.

"What is that you see, Michael?" asked Frank, as the old scout, who had been riding ahead, drew up his horse.

"I see the glimmer of bright arms in that dense cluster beyond. They await us there, I'll be sworn!"

"Then we will dash right on and encounter the beasts. Make ready, my friends, and keep together," said Frank.

"'Twere better to dismount and advance on them through the woods," suggested old Michael, "as you perceive they will have a decided advantage of us in the shelter of the trees with their firearms."

"You are wise, Michael. Dismount, my friends, and we will advance in two parties, each taking a side of the path."

The attack was arranged accordingly.

Frank led six of his friends along the edge of the path on the right, making for the group of trees where old Michael had perceived the glimmer of the arms.

Louis Real led the others on the left.

Old Michael accompanied the party led on by his young friend, and he still kept bravely in advance, with Frank close at his heels.

"Keep the shelter of the trees as much as possible," continued the old guide in a whisper, "or they may pick us off with their carbines. They are now aware that we have discovered their ambush. There goes a volley, by St. Denis."

As the old man spoke several guns were discharged some forty yards ahead and the balls struck the trees on all sides of the attacking party, but without inflicting a wound on any of them.

"Dash in now," yelled Frank, so that he could be heard by Louis. "At the beasts with sword and pistol."

As Frank was leading his party up to the clump of trees before mentioned, a hoarse voice therein hailed him, crying:

"Halt one instant, as I would parley with you, Captain DeLacy."

"Halt, friends," cried Frank. "What would you, wretch? Do you propose to surrender to us?"

"Surrender, forsooth! I propose to fight you on equal terms, singly, and man to man."

Frank was somewhat astonished at this proposition, and, fearing some new treachery, he cried:

"Take shelter behind the trees, my friends, and keep your pistols cocked."

Then, turning to the leader of the Wolves, who appeared at the edge of the thick clump of trees, he cried:

"I do not understand you, Wolf."

"We will encounter you man to man, one at a time. We number thirteen good swords and we challenge you to meet us and decide the struggle."

"What say you, my brave friends?" cried Frank, turning to his followers.

A universal cry of approval arose at once from the hunters.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TREACHERY OF THE WOLVES AND THE FIERCE PURSUIT.

Frank DeLacy was very suspicious of the treacherous Wolves when the duel was proposed by the leader.

Having stepped back to his friends, he said:

"Gentlemen, you have all heard the proposal from the leader of the band. Think you that he intends a fair combat?"

"I do not for one," responded Louis Real, "as I cannot see what he will gain by the series of duels. I sincerely believe he is meditating some deep treachery."

"That he means to deal fair you may be sure he does not," said old Michael. "We were but fools to delay the onset."

Other members of Frank's band coincided with the foregoing opinions.

There was an open space of ground between the contending parties.

When the leader of the Wolves returned to prepare his men a dead silence ensued.

After consulting with his friends, Frank advanced again, crying:

"Sir Wolf, I would consult with you once more ere we fight."

The leader came out on the instant, saying:

"What would you?"

"We have concluded that it will be wiser for us all to set on at the same time. Call out your men on the instant, while I advance to meet you."

"Why are you suspicious? Do you fear that we will outdo you in single combat?"

"You are but a treacherous robber and it was unwise of me to parley with you."

"You are a fool," yelled the grim leader, springing back into the wood. "Now rush on to your own destruction."

"Charge, my brave men!" cried Frank, springing after the leader. "Forward and crush the vile beasts."

The twelve men sprang forward after their young leader, sending forth a ringing cheer at the same time.

A mocking laugh came back from the wood and then the leader's voice was heard as he cried:

"Idiots, you but rush to death."

"Forward," cried Frank, as he entered the wood, sword in hand.

Then he stared around, hoping to meet his foul foe.

The Wolves had disappeared in a mysterious manner and they did not leave a single trace behind them to guide their foes in their pursuit.

Fearing some deep treachery, Frank drew up his men inside the wood and his eyes were bent on the ground as he turned to old Michael.

"What do you make of their disappearance?" asked Frank. "But one man has retreated by this bridge?"

"Be not too certain of that. Let me consider a moment."

And the old man bent down to examine the footprint.

"I think we had better bring up the horses and scour the wood," advised Louis Real, impatiently.

"Let us cross the bridge and pursue that single footmark," said another.

"Wait—wait," cautioned old Michael, with another grave shake of the head. "I'll wager my good ax they have all crossed here."

"How can that be?"

"It is so. See how large and how deep in the snow that footprint is. It was made by that villainous landlord, who has been famed for his large feet."

"But where did the Wolves go to that we do not see their marks?"

"The Wolves crossed here also, treading in single file in the landlord's footsteps."

"This is strategy with a vengeance. Let us to horse and after them."

"Wait—wait," cried the old man, "or you will fall into a trap."

Then he peered under the bridge, which was supported in the centre by a wooden pillar of rough construction.

Frank DeLacy was growing impatient at the delay in pursuit.

"Hasten back, four of you, and bring up the horses," he cried. "We will go after the dogs at all hazards."

"Yes, bring up the horses," cried old Michael, "but don't attempt to cross that bridge with them just yet."

"Is it not safe?"

"It may be, yet I have my doubts. Let me investigate further."

And the old man walked fearlessly over to the centre of the bridge, as he kept muttering to himself:

"The Wolves are aiming for a bloodless victory on their part. They are scheming to destroy us all at one swoop. Ah, but that leader is an acute skirmisher. He is a natural brigand."

In the meantime, five of the party had hastened back for the horses.

Frank was about to follow old Michael on the bridge, when the latter waved him back, crying:

"One is enough here at present. Let me investigate alone."

The active old man then stooped over the side of the bridge and peered into the deep waters beneath, as he muttered:

"They had not the time to cut that strong post. What other deviltry do the fiends meditate here?"

The water was not very clear and the old man could not see the bottom.

He was about to raise his head again when his eyes caught an object below and he started up, muttering:

"The infernal fiends. They would send us all into the water and then shoot at us like water rats. The beasts!"

Retreating back quietly, the old man said to Frank:

"You perceive that line of young trees on the hill beyond?"

"Assuredly."

"The Wolves are up there."

"Then we will charge upon them when the horses come back."

"I must take a swim first."

"You take a swim this cold night! You are mad!"

"If I were to allow you to cross that bridge on the horses now I would be mad."

"What do you mean?"

"There's a strong rope attached to that centrepole and the other end of it is now held by some of the strong Wolves."

"Mercy—I understand. They would precipitate us all into the river!"

"And then shoot you like rats!"

"Now what is to be done?"

"I will in and cut the rope with my hunting knife."

"But I am younger than you."

"No matter; you could not use the knife as I will."

Slipping down quietly, the old man dropped into the water in a noiseless manner and then dived for the post.

He had scarcely reached the post, when Louis Real, who was one of those dispatched for the horses, appeared at the bridge, crying:

"The horses have disappeared, captain. Treachery is at work."

"What a misfortune! The villainous baffle us at every turn."

And Frank DeLacy uttered a deep groan.

Recovering himself on the instant, however, he said, in firm tones:

"We must not be discouraged. We must go after the dogs when Michael gets back."

He then explained to his friend the treacherous trick of the rope on the post.

Old Michael was soon back on the bank, and, having swallowed some brandy, he said:

"'Tis just as I surmised. The rope was a strong one. The bridge would have given way under us."

"Did you sever it?"

"Not fully. The beasts above there must not feel it giving way. I left a cord holding it, but it is not strong enough to pull the post away. Where are the horses?"

Frank explained the position.

"They are the veriest fiends out of the lower regions," said the old man. "Yet will we baffle them for all that."

"How can you explain about the loss of the horses, old man?"

"Some of them must have remained behind hidden in the trees. They are making a desperate effort to slay you and your friends, Captain DeLacy. They fear that you know too much already."

"I will soon know more. Let us charge up at them now."

"Do wait and hear my proposal. Let us retire here behind the trees."

"What do you propose, Michael?"

"Let each man take a position behind a tree and then take aim with his piece at that grove above the bridge."

"I understand, You aim to draw the Wolves from their cover?"

"That is my object. Now, get ready and send a volley at them. Then load again as soon as possible."

Each man took the position proposed and thirteen carbines were aimed at the grove.

"Fire!" was Frank's command.

The volley rang out on the night air and then two death shrieks arose from the grove above the bridge.

"That told on them," cried old Michael, in jubilant tones.

"Keep behind the trees and load again with a will."

The words were scarcely uttered when a report was heard from the grove and half a dozen bullets struck the trees behind which the brave friends were sheltered.

"Give it to them again!" cried Frank.

"Hold a moment," cried old Michael, "for they will soon break cover. Now, you see them darting out from the grove. Take sure aim and fire."

Six of the Wolves darted out of the unsafe shelter at this moment and they were making up the hill beyond when another volley from Frank and his friends struck two of them down.

"Now, up and after them," yelled old Michael, darting for the bridge. "Load as you run, my brave Frenchmen."

They did load as they ran, and when their thirteen pursuers gained the grove they sent another volley up at their diminished foes.

"Press on, press on!" cried Frank, with great excitement.

"We are now assured of a signal victory, my friends."

Up the hill the Wolves darted through the snow and after them rushed their pursuers, paying no attention to the dead bodies found lying in their path.

Only three of the Wolves gained the top of the hill and not a single one of their foes had received a wound.

"What of the horses, think you, Michael?" asked Frank, as they were gaining the top of the hill.

"We have slain five and there must be eight left, with that dog of a landlord. Six of them must have remained behind to secure the horses."

"But they will have to cross the stream to reach the others with the horses."

"There's another small bridge a league above here. See, the accursed brutes are making that way."

"Press on, press on!" cried Frank. "We must cut them down before they join the others with their horses."

They were then dashing along over an open plain, from whence the snow had been swept by the heavy winds, and their foes were not more than two hundred yards in advance of them.

"I'd give much to know if the accursed leader be with those three," cried Frank, "as I long to slay the dog with my own hand."

"He is—he is," returned old Michael. "See you not his tall figure bounding on ahead of the others?"

"Ha, there's a party riding to meet them in the distance," cried Louis Real.

"The Wolves left behind with the horses," cried Frank.

"Press on, on your lives, and let us intercept them."

"Load again!" cried old Michael, "and send a volley as you run."

They hastened to obey.

The retreating Wolves had flung away their firearms in order to hasten their flight.

The active pursuers, who were selected for their activity as much as for their bravery, did not permit them to gain an inch in the exciting chase.

On the contrary, although impeded by the heavy carbines, they closed on the Wolves in an amazing manner, and they did not lose much time even when loading their weapons.

Again did those fatal weapons belch forth their fire and down on the plain fell two more of the Wolves.

And now the unknown leader of that ruthless band was pressing on alone.

He beheld his friends a mile ahead and they were pressing their horses at full speed to his aid leading the other animals with them.

"There are just six of them, as I supposed," cried old Michael. "Press on and load again."

The leader of the Wolves looked back at the moment and a cry of despair burst from him as he shook his hand at his foes.

"Load, load!" cried old Michael, "and aim at the riders. The villain of a leader bears a charmed life."

Putting forth renewed speed, the desperate man ahead made a final effort to reach his oncoming friends and he succeeded.

Just as he was about to spring on one of the led horses another volley from the pursuers rang out and three of his followers fell from their saddles.

The others turned their horses and fled in different directions, while the loosened horses scampered in towards the pursuers.

"Call your horses, friends," yelled Frank DeLacy, "and mount for pursuit. Ha, here is my own good steed. Now, I am away after that incarnate fiend."

The "incarnate fiend" alluded to was on a good horse and he was dashing away alone, taking the direction leading back to the upper bridge.

On, after him, thundered Frank, who had full faith in his own good steed, as well as in his honest right arm.

Was it destined that he was to close with the leader of the dreaded Wolves on that eventful night or would the fiend escape as before, to form his band anew for murder and rapine?

CHAPTER XX.

THE LAST STRUGGLE WITH THE LEADER OF THE WOLVES..

As Frank pressed on after his foe he glanced around the plains and he was delighted to see that his friends were in full pursuit of the other surviving Wolves.

"They are aware of my desire to cope with the fiend ahead," he muttered, "and they have left me to deal with him."

One glance back, however, showed him that a single horseman was riding after him at what might be termed a respectful distance.

Away toward the bridge pressed the fugitive leader of the Wolves, glancing back every now and again to watch his pursuer.

"He is a coward, after all," muttered Frank, "or he would stand and show me fight, but I presume he has had enough of my good sword for one night."

Then Frank noticed that he was gaining on his foe.

The good steed beneath him was chosen for his speed and endurance and well did he repay the confidence placed in him.

Very soon Frank was within hailing distance of the Wolf and he shouted:

"Hold, dog, and I will cross swords with you again. Then be it my life or yours to end the struggle!"

"You are brave when your friends are close behind you!" answered the Wolf.

"I swear to you that they will not interfere in the contest."

"If I slew you, as slay you I would, they would all set on me. No, no! I live for a triumph over you on another occasion. I will avenge my fallen friends!"

"Beast that you are, your doom is now sealed! I will tear the mask from your face and wash the black therefrom when you are cold in death! Faster, faster, my brave horse!"

The brave steed did fly the faster and he was drawing closer and closer to the enemy at every stride.

Down the steep hill toward the upper bridge the riders dashed, and Frank did not draw bridle in the dangerous descent.

The Wolf pressed on as recklessly and he was soon dashing over the bridge.

Frank was not five yards behind and he sang out:

"I will soon reach you now, coward, and you must fight for your life. Aha—the villain's horse is down. Now, indeed, will he feel my good sword."

The horse of the Wolf had fallen just beyond the bridge, but the man himself was on his feet the next moment and out flashed his sword as Frank rushed at him at full speed.

Pulling up his horse, the brave young fellow drew his sword and sprang from the saddle, as he cried:

"We will fight on equal terms, dog of a Wolf. Now, defend yourself."

"To the death," was the other's reply.

"Hold—in mercy, hold!" cried a female voice, as a horsewoman dashed on the scene.

"The queen!" muttered Frank.
It was the queen and she was wearing a dark mask.
"Retire, lady," cried the Wolf, "until I punish this minion."
"You must not fight with him again or he will slay you."
"I must and will fight. The puppy is not my match."
"Yes, you must fight," cried Frank, "and the puppy will slay the foul Wolf."

"Captain DeLacy," cried the queen, "I command you to put up your sword and retire."

"I cannot obey you, madam."

"Did I not save your life to-night?"

"You did and I thanked you for it. At the same time I swore that I would pierce this fiend to death."

"But he is my dearest friend next to the king."

"I regret that, for your sake, madam, yet I must slay him."

"Retire, retire!" cried the Wolf, "and let me settle with the cur ere his friends arrive."

Louis Real had drawn up on the bridge at the moment and the queen had perceived him, for she cried:

"Mercy, his friends are here now. You are lost—lost!"

"My friends will not interfere in the fray, I assure you," cried Frank, as he beckoned Louis forward.

"Why do you summon him, then?" demanded the Wolf.

"That he may hear my request. Friend Louis, you will obey me?"

"In all things, brave captain."

"Should the wretch disarm or slay me, you will permit him to depart in peace."

"And never molest him after?"

"I do not ask so much. Should I fall you will be at liberty to avenge me hereafter, but he must depart in peace on the present occasion."

"I will obey you, on my sacred oath!"

"You hear, madam," cried Frank. "Be pleased to stand aside and permit me to punish this beast."

"Yes, yes," cried the Wolf. "Stand aside and witness my work on this vain puppy. At you, base cur!"

The queen was compelled to stand aside, as the swords were clashing at the instant.

The distressed woman watched the struggle with tearful eyes, and she did not entertain a single wish for the success of the Wolf, whom she professed to regard with so kindly a friendship.

She did not wish his death, yet she did not wish him to slay the brave young soldier opposed to him, as she felt a deep interest in the young man.

The struggle was fierce and long, as the combatants put forth all their skill in the deadly strife.

At length Frank received a slight wound in the sword-arm and the blood therefrom dropped on the ground.

He did not cease the struggle for a moment, however, but attacked his able foe with fresh vigor.

"Surrender and I will spare your life," sneered the Wolf, hoping to irritate Frank into a foolhardy movement.

"Yes, yes—spare his life," cried the queen. "He is wounded now. Oh, cease the dreadful strife, my friends."

"I will cease when I can no longer strike," said Frank.

"Now here's for your death," cried the Wolf, making a fierce thrust at Frank's throat.

But he was not successful.

On the contrary, the Wolf reeled back the next moment with a fatal wound in his own throat.

Before he could recover himself Frank was on him again, and again did the young hero's sword pierce the Wolf's throat.

"Oh, this is butchery!" gasped the queen.

"'Tis to the death," said Frank. "Ha, he is down."

Yes, the dreaded Wolf was down on the ground, with the life-blood gushing from his throat.

The queen rushed to his side and bent down, exclaiming:

"Oh, mercy—you are not dead?"

"I am—my secret—prevail on—oh—I am dying!"

The fearless and ruthless leader of the Wolves did not utter another word.

Frank DeLacy had conquered him at last, for the Wolf was dead.

"He is dead—he is dead!" groaned the queen. "Oh, it was all my doing."

"Dear lady," said Frank, bending over his fallen foe, "I did but my duty. I should keep my oath."

"Yes, yes, I know. Oh, how may we dispose of his body?"

"I must first look at his face," said Frank, tearing away the mask. "Ha—it is still blackened."

"And so it must remain, even in his unhonored grave."

"But I must look at it. I must wash away the stain. The name of the foul conspirator must be published to the world."

"It must not. If you dare to remove the stain I will plunge this dagger into my heart."

The distressed woman drew a dagger as she spoke and held it to her breast.

Frank seized her arm on the instant and drew the weapon from her, as he cried:

"This is the height of madness, madam, and you must remember your own children."

"But I will be forever disgraced if his face is exposed. Oh, brave young man, do not drive me to desperation."

"But I am pledged, and——"

"Oh, will you not do as much for your afflicted queen? What will it avail you to expose me?"

"I will keep your secret and pledge my sacred oath never to betray you on making me two solemn promises."

"What are they?"

"You must pledge me your honor that you will never conspire against the wise Richelieu again."

"As I will never have the heart, I can freely pledge you so much."

"You must also tell me the name of that man in confidence."

"I cannot—I dare not."

"I swear to you solemnly that I will never expose your secret."

"Not even to Richelieu?"

"Not even to Richelieu. Not even to my future wife."

"Then you will assist me to bury him in the forest yonder?"

"I will, and my friend will assist me. He does not know you."

The queen placed her mouth to the young man's ear and whispered:

"The unfortunate man is my natural half brother, the famous Count De B——"

Frank started on hearing the name.

The young man was astounded.

He expected that the dead man was some leader of note in the French court, but he did not dream that he would turn out to be one of the most famous soldiers in all Europe at the time.

The queen turned away, weeping bitter tears, and Frank called his friend, as he asked:

"Will we bury him in yonder wood?"

"No, no," said the queen. "Bear him to the villa and I will have him buried in secret."

The dead Wolf was lifted on his own horse and borne to the villa, Frank pledging his friend to secrecy.

In the early morning the young men escorted the queen to Versailles, where it was rumored that she had been rescued from the Wolves.

Frank there learned that all the Wolves had been slain, but that none of them had been recognized.

Richelieu rewarded the young man by prompt promotion, and he was soon a happy husband, as Marie became his bride.

Frank DeLacy became a noted soldier in the wars that followed, and he was Richelieu's chief favorite while the great statesman lived.

Old Michael lived in Frank's household thereafter, and he was very proud of his achievements against the Wolves.

The unhappy queen mourned for her dead brother in secret, and she often paid a visit to his unhonored grave.

She never again conspired against the great Richelieu, and when the old statesman was dead she was compelled to admit that France had lost one who had advanced the nation to wealth and prosperity.

And so ends our romance of the famous FRENCH WOLVES.

THE END.

Read "A DESPERATE GAME; OR, THE MYSTERY OF DION TRAVERS' LIFE," which will be the next number (97) of "Pluck and Luck."

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